

"...our identity and true calling as Christians is as beloved Children of God."

Rev. Amanda Ghaffarian

January 17, 2021, Second Sunday of Christmas, Year B

St. Thomas Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Click here for a printable version of this sermon.

Samuel's Call

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Then the Lord said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever." Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

Samuel's Call story is a familiar one to many people and is one of my favorite call stories in the Bible. For those of you less familiar:

The backstory-

People in Israel were going through the motions offering sacrifices to God and whatnot, but their connection and relationship with God was strained. There was also unchecked corruption among some of the leaders of the temple that was causing harm, including misdeeds perpetrated by Eli's own sons. As a result, visions and true communication with God had become rare and were not widespread.

So then by the time we arrive on the scene in today's text, Eli has already been warned once of the consequences of his family's misdeeds and his tolerance for the injustices occurring. Up until that point though, it hasn't caused him to be removed from power--but his days on earth are numbered.

As for the other primary figure in our story, besides God of course, we are introduced to Samuel. Samuel has been in the temple for a little bit now and while he too went through the motions to worship and honor God, he really did not know God yet. We don't know his exact age or how long he was in the temple, only that he had been brought there to serve God as soon as he was weaned from his mother.

So it makes sense then that even though he was lying down close to where the ark of the covenant was, he automatically assumes that the voice calling his name is Eli. And as the story goes, he quickly responds each time to the voice by going to Eli to find out what he wants. Three times he did this.

God is pretty persistent in calling Samuel, even though Samuel doesn't have a clue that it is God. Eventually though, Eli helps Samuel figure it out, and thus begins Samuel's journey as a prophet and judge, speaking God's truth even in the face of adversity, because God's truth needed to be spoken.

For many of us who have heard this account over the years, we are drawn to the familiar call and response of God calling Samuel's name and Samuel responding, Here I am.

We are excited about the prospect of God speaking to us, giving our lives meaning and purpose, and then living out that purpose.

In reality though, some of the most common laments I hear from people of all ages are: "How do I know what God is calling me to do with my life? And how do I know it is God calling me?"

From there we get a multi layered answer. The first is to recognize that our identity and true calling as Christians is as beloved Children of God. We are washed in the waters of baptism and claimed by Christ, fed and forgiven, and then sent into the world to proclaim the good news of what God's love means for the world. God calls us over and over throughout the scriptures to love God and love our neighbor as a way to live out our calling as children of God.

As for our secondary callings in life, those are the callings that stem out of our initial calling as Children of God and take into account the use of the gifts and talents that God has given us. Those take a little bit deeper discernment to figure out because they are more individualized. Some will be called to be advocates and speak out against injustices, clearly articulating the problems at hand and finding creative solutions to fix them. Others may be called to work behind the scenes with little to no recognition for their work, though still loving and serving their neighbors and fighting against injustice. Yet others might be called to use what gifts and skills that they have been given to do honest work in their chosen profession and attempt to stop the injustices from occurring in the first place.

For discernment in this case to follow the examples found in the Eli and Samuel story takes two parts, guidance and listening for what God has to say. Samuel did not know God so Eli had to tell him about God so that he could respond appropriately. We too learned at least the basics of everything we know about God from those who have gone before us, from the people who taught us in Sunday School, the ones who preached to us, the ones who raised us, all the way back to the saints from ages past and the very first individuals who copied God's word into writing to preserve it for our generation and generations to come. We too then are given the responsibility to teach those who may not know about God and tell God's story to the world.

The second part is a much more difficult part for us today: listening, more specifically listening to where God is calling us, what God is calling us to say, and what God is calling us to do. So often we would rather speak or ignore something rather than listening. Listening is difficult, it can be uncomfortable, it can challenge us in ways we would rather not be challenged. When we are listening for God to speak to us this is doubly so. We want God to listen to our prayers, but we also want an immediate response in our favor and often don't give God a chance to speak to us more deeply.

To know God and be in relationship with God is an important part of our spirituality, both individually and collectively as the priesthood of all believers. In order to be in relationship with God though we must have communication with God -- through reading the scriptures, spending time in prayer, and spending time listening for God's voice in the world.

So, my challenge for you all watching today, wherever you are, is to take some time for intentional silence and listening this week. Read a few passages from scripture that are calling to you this week and take some time in silence to reflect how God might be

speaking through them to you. If you are having trouble with this, call you pastor or friend in the faith or spiritual advisor and talk it out. Sometimes we need those people like Eli in our lives to help us figure things out and those people like Samuel who hear God clearer at times than we can.

We are not on this journey alone, though our paths of faith may take different twists and turns. There is only one God. One God who is faithful, persistent, and calls us by name. May God be with you as you listen to hear it. Amen.