

Sunday, January 17, 2021
Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)

1 Samuel 3.1-10; John 1.43-51

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/524886064522726/videos/397644114642615>

(Sermon begins at about 14:15)

“You Are Called”

In many ways, the theme of today’s readings is just a continuation of what we discussed last week. As you hopefully recall, last week we talked about how Jesus’ identity as the Son of God, as Beloved of God, was revealed through his baptism. In my sermon, I noted that there was more to Jesus’ baptism than just the revelation of his true identity. Through his baptism, Jesus was showing a sign of solidarity with humanity. In doing so—in the way that he did it—he was also inviting us to share in his identity. He is inviting us to be members of the Body of Christ, whereby we live in accordance with his values.

Today’s readings, particularly our Old Testament and Gospel readings, are more of the same. Only more so. Only more specific. Last week was a general invitation to all humanity to share in Christ’s identity, whereby being members of the Body of Christ becomes our true identity. Today, we take that invitation to the next level. Or rather, Jesus takes the act of inviting to the next level. Today we are not just invited into a new identity. We are invited to live into that identity in specific ways. In ways that are unique to the individual.

Our focus today is on “call narratives.” Stories of people being specifically invited into ministry in very specific ways. Our Old Testament reading is the story of the call of Samuel. And our Gospel reading is the calling of two of Jesus’ disciples: Philip and Nathanael. Each of these stories has something important to tell us about what it means to be called into ministry, what that call looks like, and what responding to that call entails.

Let’s start with our Old Testament reading from First Samuel. As a young child, Samuel was dedicated by his parents to God’s service as a Nazarite and given into the care of the priests at the temple in Shiloh. Even though he has been working at the temple in Shiloh for some years, the portion we heard today is the first recorded encounter between Samuel and God. At this point, Samuel is still just a boy, thought to be about 11 or 12. He is serving as an apprentice to the priest Eli in the temple. In the story, God comes to Samuel at night and calls him three times. Each time, Samuel thinks it is Eli in the next room. After round three, Eli realizes that it must be God speaking to Samuel, and gives him the advice to next time respond with the words “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

When God calls again, Samuel is ready. He responds with “Speak, for your servant is listening.” Which sets off the beginning of quite an illustrious career. Samuel first becomes a priest. He then goes on to become one of the first major prophets of Israel. In his role as prophet, he also functioned as a judge, which were basically the ones who ruled over Israel prior to the establishment of the Kingdom of Israel. Although never officially named as a judge, Samuel was

recognized as being wise and a spokesman for God. Because of these qualities and the resulting respect of the people, he was effectively the last ruler of Israel before the establishment of the kingdom. In this role, he led the people in the final battle that ended Philistine domination over Israel, bringing independence. When the people demanded a king—because all the other countries have kings, so why can't we have a king, too?—it was Samuel who anointed Saul as the first king of the United Monarchy of Israel and Judah. And then when Saul fell out of favor with God, it was Samuel who, at God's direction, secretly anointed David as Saul's successor. From his simple beginning of being dedicated to God's service—something he had absolutely no say in—he went on to serve God as priest, as prophet, as de facto judge and military leader, and as kingmaker. Not bad for a boy from the hill country of Ephraim.

What is particularly important about the story of Samuel's call is the interaction between God and Samuel. How God called three times and Samuel did not realize that it was God. But then, upon advice of his mentor, Samuel is able to recognize that it is God calling, and can respond. This is probably one of the most common things about call experiences. We often do not recognize that God is even calling us into his service. Such callings do not necessarily involve audibly hearing God's voice. More often than not, the calling is more in the form of a feeling. A gentle nudging. Sometimes internal, or sometimes from external sources. Perhaps from other people whom God is working through. And often times, easy to overlook. Or even if somewhat recognized, easy to dismiss.

The story of Samuel's call illustrates three specific things that are helpful in identifying and responding to a call from God. The first is the fact that God is persistent. In the story of Samuel, it took God calling four times before Samuel was able to recognize that it was God and to respond. But that's nothing. That might as well have been instantaneous. Some people don't recognize the call for years. Or some, if they do recognize God's call, ignore or deny it for years. I like to say that God and I argued for 20 years before I gave in. Although in actuality it was probably more like 10. Regardless, I know from personal experience that God is nothing if not persistent. As a friend told me at one point in my own discernment, "God has you by the scruff of the neck, and no matter how much you kick and scream, he will not let you go."

Which brings us to the second thing Samuel's call narrative tells us about the process of God calling us. We don't do this work alone. We often need help from others in recognizing that what we are feeling might be God calling. We often need help from others to help us figure out just what is going on. Just as Eli was able, after Samuel coming to him three times, to recognize what was going on. That's why we don't do discernment work alone. We do it in community. Because others can often see and hear things about our own sense of call that we can't. Sometimes others see that we are being called when we don't recognize it. Or when we don't want to. Because we are too close to it. Or because we are too stubborn to listen.

And the third thing is the response. Eli's advice to Samuel was to respond with "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Not "listen, Lord, for your servant is speaking." This is God's time to let us know what he wants from us. Not time to argue with God. Not time to tell God what we want. Rather, time to be open to listening and discerning what God is doing in our lives.

Before moving on to the Gospel, I should probably note that even though Samuel's call led him to become a priest, a prophet, a military leader, and a kingmaker, the principles apply to God calling anyone to service in his name. We are not all called to be priests or prophets. But we are all called to God's service, by virtue of being his beloved children. By virtue of us being members of the Body of Christ. Sometimes it is being called to participate in a particular ministry, such as serving as a LEM or Lector, working with Feed My Lambs or the Food Bank, or serving on Vestry or a particular committee. No call is greater or better than another. Because all are calls to serve our Lord. The important thing is not what we are being called to. The important thing is the fact that we are called. As such, the calling is as individual as we are. And the response is as individual as we are.

Which is a nice segue into the Gospel. Today we hear about Jesus inviting—calling—several of his disciples. In the part before today's reading, Jesus calls Peter and his brother Andrew. In today's reading, he first calls Philip and then Nathanael. The call narratives we hear today really do point out the different and unique ways people are called and how they respond. With Philip, Jesus goes up to him and invites him "Follow me." There is no discussion or further detail. Next thing we know Philip is out finding other recruits. So, the assumption is that Philip accepted Jesus' invitation without hesitation. And not only that, he immediately jumped in feet first, enthusiastic to live into his new calling.

And then there's the call of Nathanael. A very different call experience. In this case, it is not Jesus who does the calling, but Philip invites Nathanael to follow Jesus. When Philip tells Nathanael about Jesus, Nathanael hems and haws, engaging in skeptical discourse. Nathanael's prejudices show through. When he finds out that Jesus is from Nazareth, he responds "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" After all, Nazareth is a little backwater village of no importance. Thus far in the history of God's people, no one chosen by God to lead his people have been from a place like that. Wouldn't the Messiah be from someplace like Jerusalem or even Bethlehem, where the exalted King David was from? It is only after he has a personal encounter with Jesus that Nathanael accepts the calling. Sometimes that's what it takes. A more direct, personal experience of Christ, of God, to help us realize that the calling is authentic.

Two very different experiences of being called to follow Jesus.

We are all called to be of service to God, to follow Jesus. What that looks like is as unique as we are. What we learn from Scripture is that we need to quiet ourselves and be open to hearing the voice of God, the voice of Christ, coming to us. Be it an invitation directly from God or be it revealed through the perspective and insights of others. Be it a shout or a nearly imperceptible whisper. Regardless, what our readings for today show us is that to hear God's call, we often need a change of perspective. To have others who help us see or hear differently, as Eli did for Samuel. To have someone point out something that we may not have even considered, as Philip did for Nathanael.

Often times, what is needed, as is alluded to in our readings for today, is a change in perspective to help us see with new eyes. Or to hear with new ears. This time of pandemic is certainly providing us with a new perspective. New perspectives on what is truly important to

us. New perspectives on how we might live our lives differently, particularly when we are liberated from current restrictions. I cannot help but think that this time of pandemic is providing an opportunity for each of us to consider how God might be calling. To consider what God might be calling us to do in his name. With so much time away from our church and the yearning to return, perhaps something new is bubbling up—something new that you might be called to do when we are able to be together again. Or, for that matter, maybe something you might be able to do even now during our current restrictions. Perhaps some need has become more apparent that you are being called to meet.

As American writer and theologian Frederick Buechner so eloquently noted, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”¹ Listen for how God is speaking in your life. Listen for what God may be inviting you to do. Look at the world around you and see what touches your heart. See where your “deep gladness,” your passions, might intersect with some “deep hunger,” some pressing need, in the world around you.

There is so much to be done to help heal this broken and hurting world. And there is something that only you can do to help with that. If you listen hard enough, God will let you know what that is, what he needs you to do. When you figure that out, the next step is to go ahead and jump in and start doing it. Because God will not give up until you do.

¹ https://www.azquotes.com/author/2133-Frederick_Buechner