

Vocation
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – January 14, 2024

Please Read:
John 1:43-51
I Samuel 3:1-10

I smile at the story of what happened at a recent ecumenical gathering when the secretary rushed in shouting, "The building is on fire!"

The METHODISTS gathered in the corner and prayed. The BAPTISTS yelled, "Where is the water?" The QUAKERS sat quietly praising God for the blessings that fire brings. The LUTHERANS posted a notice on the door protesting that fire was evil. The ROMAN CATHOLICS called Rome for direction. The CONGREGATIONALISTS shouted, "Everyone for themselves!" The LIBERALS reflected on what socio-political significance this event might have and began literary-criticism and redaction of the various accounts of how the fire got started. The FUNDAMENTALISTS proclaimed simply, "It is the wrath of God." The CHRISTIAN SCIENTISTS concluded there really was no fire. The PENTECOSTALS danced around the flame hoping it would spread. The PRESBYTERIANS called a meeting and appointed a chairperson who was to appoint a committee to look into the matter and draft a written report and develop an action plan that would be reviewed at a later meeting. The ANGLICANS made a procession, lit candles, and marched out. Finally, the secretary got the fire extinguisher and put out the fire!

It is good to laugh at ourselves! And tomorrow, by the way, I'm sure there won't be a fire at the MLK Ecumenical service hosted by the Methodists, so please do come! Suffice it to say, depending on where we are on life's journey, and depending on our traditions, personalities, and experiences, we all have different responses to life's challenges. In the same way, we all have different ways of perceiving God's call and discerning our vocation. The word vocation comes from the Latin word "vocare," *to call*. We choose different ways to live out our call.

The primary elections coming up in Iowa tomorrow is all the rage in the news. It's important because it begins a very important election process to determine what call we will follow as a nation. The fact is everyone is following some sense of "calling." You can call it your passion (or lack of passion), your vision, your dream. We listen to stump speeches and choose the party platform that seems best for our future. For some people, it's about a charismatic leader, belief system, or other values and priorities. Whatever, we're all following someone or something.

Both of our lectionary lessons today point to the obvious fact that God's call process is not like that of the world. God chooses the most unlikely people. God

does not usually go to the obvious choices, the experts and specialists, but chooses servant leaders to pursue a mission of change and reform toward a better life and fairer world for all people. Sometimes it's hard to hear and to respond to the call.

For example, in our Old Testament lesson, God chose to speak to the temple *servant* rather than the temple *priest*. As a boy, the adopted son of a priest, young Samuel spent a great deal of time around the temple. He was what Luther might have called a "sacristy rat," someone who hangs around the church. Samuel helped old Eli. The old priest's eyes were growing dim and he could use the boy to fetch things for him.

Samuel, it turns out, was the person God used to establish kingship in Israel. Samuel not only anointed both Saul and David, Israel's first two kings, but he also gave definition to the new order of God's rule over Israel that began with the incorporation of kingship into its structure. Samuel, more than anyone else, provided for covenant continuity in a time of transition from the rule of the judges to monarchy.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus calls a couple of rather ordinary and anonymous people from out of the way places to follow him, two unlikely men who helped to change the world. Philip was likely a fisherman, coming from the town Bethsaida, which means "house of fishing", and Nathanael is a disciple we really don't know much about. They were common, ordinary people, called by the Lord into an uncommon, extraordinary new life.

But that should not surprise us, for God throughout history has called into being great leaders from among the most base and rough-shod folks. Moses, for example, first an abandoned child and later adult murderer, fugitive of the law and shepherd become liberator of the oppressed people of Israel. Or Jacob, the swindler who cheats his brother out of an inheritance becomes the father of a great nation. David, the adulterer murderer King, writer of most of our Psalms. And then there is Mary, the simple maidservant, called to bring to the world God's anointed one. And Peter, the betrayer coward – one of the historic pillars and evangelists of the early church... The list goes on and on...

The record is clear on who God calls to follow. God is serious enough about transforming our world that God calls ordinary people like you and me. It's been said that God is not so interested in peoples' *natural ability* as in their *divine availability*. I like Frederick Buechner's famous tool for evaluating how God is calling you. "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Secondly, I like Diana Butler Bass's insight that in this season of Epiphany it's all about light, and learning about the source of all light, Mr. Light of the World. Philip calls his brother, "Come and see." Following Jesus is learning to see everyone and everything around you in a new way, in the light of God's love...

Part of discerning the call is listening, to "hear" the call, but it is also about seeing yourself in a new way, seeing God in a new way, and seeing the people around you, the world, in a new way. Butler Bass observes,

Jesus sees Nathanael under a fig tree, under the covering of shame. Yet Jesus sees a good man, a person of pure heart. When he said to Nathanael, "I saw you under the fig tree," he was saying, "I see YOU – beyond your shame, beyond whatever you seek to hide, beyond every bad choice you have ever made. And I see you for who you really are: without deceit." There is no judgment, no condemnation; instead, there is an invitation to come into the light.

For most of us, we are just trying to figure out if God is communicating at all. It's interesting that in the O.T. passage, the writer comments that "the word of the Lord was rare in those days." Safe from any disruptive, challenging words of God, people could show up at the temple now and then, go through a few prescribed rituals, and feel better about themselves. That was all. And old Eli tottered about the temple, going through the motions, keeping the altar fires lit during a time when "the word of God was rare."

Into this time of settled, routine religion, one night little Samuel hears his name called. He doesn't understand at first. He assumes it is the voice of old Eli, calling him to fetch something for him. But no, the voice calls, "Samuel! Samuel!" and three times the boy goes to old Eli asking, "You called?" Wise Eli told the boy, if you hear the voice again, say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant hears."

We could say from Samuel and the first disciples' experience that in God's call process there is both a promise and a warning. The promise is that though the "word of God may be rare," God is not forever silent. One night, when we are minding our own business, or one Sunday morning when we're in church just going through the motions, there is a voice, we hear our name called, and like little Samuel, our world changes. The call of God promises to bring change, transformation, new hope and meaning for our lives, reminding us first that we are beloved, that we have infinite value and worth...

But it also means that as you learn to hear the Good News, you will also learn to see the world differently. And you will know that to follow Jesus means to live into his self-giving love and justice.

Andrew Young, once a close associate of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, is an ordained minister of the United Church of Christ. He was also the U.S. ambassador to the U.N., and the mayor of Atlanta. He once told a group that he was delighted when his eldest daughter had become active in her local church. With each deepening level of her involvement, he became more and more pleased. But then one day she announced to her parents that she was going to join the ministry of Habitat for Humanity to build homes for the poor of Uganda. This was not too many years after the fall of Idi Amin, and Uganda was still a very violent country.

Andrew Young confessed, "I tried to talk her out of it. I mean, I wanted her to go to church, to find a nice Christian man to marry, to develop a relationship with God and settle down. But I didn't have anything like this in mind. I didn't intend for her to go so far with it. I mean, Uganda, of all places! But she said she felt called. What could I say?"

Parents and children, young and old alike: Listen up! Look alive! Beware of coming to church. You may not be fully prepared for the consequences. It can be risky to hang around in the temple because, if you do, you just might hear the voice of the Lord!

In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Brutus reflected on such windows of opportunity when he said, "There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and miseries."

If you're like me, like young Samuel, it may take God a few times to get your attention. We are all different, and we'll respond differently. But when you hear the call of God and see the hunger of the world around you, the call to serve, the call to be more loving, more forgiving, the call to trust more completely, to obey God's command, to pray, to study, to be still, to use your gifts for ministry... or as a church, the call to be more generous, more caring, more Christ-centered, more bold in our outreach to those hurting and broken in this lost and indifferent world... whatever the call may be, when it is from God, we must listen and respond...

What do you hear and see? Following Jesus, behold, you'll see greater things and experience God's transforming power and the joy of new life.

In the name of the One Who Is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.