

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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1 Samuel 3:1-10 (NRSV)

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.

[2] At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; [3] 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. [4] Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" [5] 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. [6] 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." [7] Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. [8] 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. [9] 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.

[10] Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

John 1:43-51 (NRSV)

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." [44] Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. [45] Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." [46] Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." [47] When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" [48] Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." [49] Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" [50] Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I

told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." [51] And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

A DISTURBING PURPOSE

Several months ago a lady made an appointment to see me. She had been through one of those 40 days of purpose seminars and was upset by what she heard. I said that I would be glad talk with her but that I wasn't that familiar with the book. In preparation for our meeting I read through the book and found it to be (by and large) a helpful introduction to Christianity. I was curious about what part she found objectionable.

It turns out that I didn't need to read the whole book. She had trouble with the first paragraph of the first chapter. Rick Warren began his best selling book by writing, "It's not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness... If you want to know why you have been placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by his purpose and for his purpose."

I've been a Christian for so long, I sometimes forget how radical the faith can be for those who are on the outside looking in. I noticed the tag line for a car commercial this past week. It was just the opposite of what Pastor Rick was saying. "It's all about you at this dealership. Come buy a car at our place, and you will be number one."

And that's what the world tells us day in and day out. Our peace of mind and personal fulfillment are at the center of the universe. It's all about me and mine. Even when we do something good, it's often an act of "charity," that is we do it something good so others can take note of what a good boy or girl we are.

Our so-called selfless acts are often used to promote ourselves and our selfish goals. Some professional sports are good examples of this shameless

self-promotion. They talk about all the charities that they support and all the good that they do. But, it is obvious that what they really want to do is increase their TV ratings by making you feel good about their spot.

Jesus once talked about those who wore their religion and good deeds on their sleeve. He said that those who do that have their reward, the acclaim of men and women. The truly faithful person does not need the acclaim of others. She or he knows that their Father in heaven knows what they have done, and that is enough. (Matthew 6:2-3)

As Warren points out in his book, we will never find our purpose in life by focusing in on what we want and need. We will never find our purpose in life by using our good deeds as a way to build a résumé. Paradoxically, as Jesus put it, the only way to “find” your life is to “lose” it, lose it for the sake of God’s kingdom as revealed in Jesus Christ. (Matthew 10:39)

A TEACHER’S CALL

When someone has the courage to really do that, to really be open to the call of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, amazing things can happen. This past week I saw a story on TV about a lady who answered a radical call. She was a teacher in the public schools and was about my age or a bit older. Her husband had been laid off from work for about two years and so their only income was her salary.

Anyway, she heard that something bad was going to happen to some children that she once taught. They were living in an abusive home, and the authorities were going to place these children (I think there were six or seven of them) in various foster homes.

This teacher couldn’t bear the thought of these children being separated in this way.

So, she and her husband decided that they were being called to become legal guardians of these children. And they did it. They knew that this decision would change their lives in a radical way and indeed it did.

Their grocery bill doubled, and now they have to do almost 30 loads of laundry each week! But, according to this teacher, she now feels more centered. Amazingly, giving in this way has not drained her energy. It has energized her. She has found her life by losing it for the sake of others.

You know, with all this negative talk about what our schools aren't doing and how our teachers are failing our students, I must say that the teachers I know are more like this woman. They go into the profession in order to give of themselves in a selfless way, day after day after day. Many of them have found in that selfless service a sense of purpose.

I believe selfless service also lies at the heart of what it means to be called by Jesus. But, it is not a path that we can choose for ourselves. It begins with a simple decision to listen for the call of God and then, to the best of our ability, follow the call of God in Jesus Christ day by day.

SAMUEL'S CALL

Our Scripture lessons for today are about learning to discern this unexpected call of God, a call that can be heard each and every day, if only can learn to recognize God's voice, a voice that often comes in a very familiar way.

In our first lesson for today little Samuel didn't recognize the voice of God. In fact, the Bible tells us that no one recognized the voice of God in those days.

In I Samuel 3:1 we read that the "word of the Lord was rare in those days and visions were not widespread." Everyone was in the dark when it came to God's call, including the priest Eli. In his old age his eyesight had grown dim, symbolic I think of the spiritual state of his family and his nation.

So, into this darkened world, a light shines. A people without call or vision are given a new prophet. The prophet is not the priest or the priest's sons or some great political or military leader.

The prophet is a little boy who had been serving the priest Eli in the temple.

When the voice of God first comes to Samuel, it does not sound all that impressive. In fact it sounds ever so much like a human voice, the voice of Eli calling out in the night perhaps. Twice the little boy ran to Eli when he heard his name being called. But, Eli did not call him.

The third time was the charm. Eli perceived that the Lord might be calling little Samuel, and he told Samuel to answer, "Speak Lord for your servant is listening."

Samuel did as he was told, and he received the call of God.

I think that we often miss the call of God in our life as well because the voice has such a familiar ring. It might sound like the voice of a family member or a friend or even the voice of a stranger.

But, we must be alert to the possibility that there is more to the familiar voice than meets the ear.

God's call often comes to us in the familiar.

We sometimes lack visions and a sense of God's presence in our own world because we despise the familiar.

PHILIP AND NATHANAEL'S CALL

That theme is a part of our second lesson from the Gospel of John. In that passage, you'll remember that Jesus first found Philip and said simply, "Come, and follow me."

Philip was so impressed by the call of Jesus that he went to find his brother Nathanael and tell him the good news. Jesus was the one they had been waiting for. He was the Messiah.

But, Nathanael also described Jesus in another way. He said that he was Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth. Nathanael had problems with the idea that the Messiah might come from Nazareth. He asked contemptuously, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

If this story were being told today, we might say something like, “Can anything good come out of Yee-Haw Junction?” Nazareth was the middle of nowhere. It was described in my Bible dictionary as an “insignificant and unimportant village.” But, when it comes to God’s call there are no insignificant places or people.

Philip countered Nathanael’s objection by simply saying, “Come and see.” See for yourself. Make your own judgment. And, in the final analysis, that is all we can ask people to do as well. Come and listen to the voice of Jesus for yourself. Do not judge him by the messenger or the location. Make a decision based upon your own personal encounter.

Hearing the call of Christ is always a personal decision. All of us must come and see and hear for ourselves. The call of Christ to those first disciples was deceptively simple. Jesus merely said, “Follow me.”

Discipleship is not believing something or doing something. It is about following someone. It is a call to relationship with Jesus. Jesus identified himself as the way, the truth and the life. (John 14:6) Jesus was the definitive source of guidance when it came to the kingdom of God.

One commentator put it this way, “Following implies an open-ended, dynamic pilgrimage, not a closed static position. Christianity is not a place to stand but a road to walk in choice companionship with the ‘leader’ of life.”

I think that this is an important truth that has been forgotten by Christians of all persuasions. We are so fond of our ideas and our programs and our goals that even in the church we sometimes have trouble making room for the call of God.

We too forget that it's not all about us and our judgments and what we want. It's about the call of God. The Bible tells us that we have been called according to a purpose, God's purpose. (Romans 8:28) We forget that the call of God is a lifelong journey with Jesus. And many of those journeys, like the journey to the cross, are trips that we would rather not take.

But, Jesus often tells us that it is the hard road that is the road to glory. He knows that we can make the trip. In fact, Jesus sees more in us than we can see.

THE FIG TREE

That was true of Nathanael. Jesus referred to him as an Israelite "in whom there is no deceit." And Jesus also said that he saw him sitting under the fig tree before Philip called you.

Nathanael responds by professing his belief in Jesus. He said, "Rabbi you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

Now, as miracles go, this one doesn't seem to be all that great. Even Jesus said, "If you believe because of this, just wait. One day you'll see the "heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

But, I think that there is more to this story than Jesus being able to "see" Nathanael before he meets him. It is about Jesus being able to understand Nathanael and what is most important to him.

Jesus knew Nathanael's desire for truth. Jesus knew his best intentions and would use those intentions for a greater kingdom.

The fig tree was symbolic of messianic peace and purity. The fig tree was also the place where rabbis studied the scriptures.

Perhaps Nathanael was meditating on the Messiah who was to come as he studied under the fig tree? I think that's a definite possibility because it explains Nathanael's strong reaction to Jesus' statement.

RESPONDING TO THE CALL OF JESUS

Someone asked at Bible study this week why the disciples left their family and friends and job merely because Jesus said, "Follow me." Surely we don't have the whole story. Surely Jesus said something more to the disciples to help them make the decision to leave everything and follow him.

I've wondered about that myself.

Perhaps this story about Nathanael gives us some insight as to why the disciples were able to respond positively to the seemingly abrupt call of Jesus. Perhaps they knew that this man Jesus knew "stuff" about them ... good stuff and bad stuff. And it was his knowledge about their personal life and the hope he offered them to be a part of something greater that enabled them to say "yes" to his call.

They followed Jesus in response to their dreams and in response to a greater dream, a dream so great that they could not think of something so overwhelming on their own. It was a greater destiny, a heavenly destiny.

Tomorrow is a holiday celebrating the life of Dr. Martin Luther King. The day before Dr. King died he was in Memphis trying to help the sanitation workers, those considered to be on the lowest rung of society's ladder. And the sermon he preached before his assassination illustrated what animated his ministry.

It was a desire to do God's will no matter what. Martin must have had a feeling that something bad was about to happen. He told the crowd that he might not make it with them into the promised land of racial equality. But, he had a vision of that day. He had climbed to the mountaintop and could see what God was going to do.

Did you notice how Jesus described the glory that Nathanael would eventually see?

It too was a dream designed to sustain him, even through the dark days of the cross. Jesus said that Nathanael would see heaven opened, and the angels of God would be ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.

That sounds a lot like the dream that Jacob had long ago. Do you remember that story? In the Old Testament we read about how Jacob ran away from home because he had stolen his brother's blessing. And since his hot headed brother Esau was bound to seek revenge, Jacob had to go.

But, despite Jacob's shortcomings God had laid his hand upon him. God had called him to bring a greater blessing to His people. And in the middle of the desert Jacob had a dream about that call. With only a rock for a pillow he lay down and dreamed about heaven.

The Scripture tells us that in Jacob's dream there was a ladder set up on the earth and stretched all the way to heaven and the angels were ascending and descending upon it. (Genesis 28:12) This was God's way of assuring Jacob that his presence would be with him every step of the difficult journey. Even in the middle of the desert with everyone against him, the angels of God did not take a holiday.

Notice the difference between Jacob's dream and what Jesus describes. The angels are ascending and descending, but there is no ladder.

Jesus is the ladder.

The Son of Man is the new pathway to heaven. Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life.” (John 14:6) We hear the call of God most clearly in the voice of Jesus. Jesus is the final connection between heaven and earth.

And if we believe this, if we truly believe that God was in Christ, then the call of God in Christ must take precedence over all other calls in our life. Like the disciples of old we must be willing to drop everything when the time comes to follow the call of Jesus.

CALLED OR DRAGGED?

The lady who came to my office was right. That is a disturbing message. I think I may have mentioned this before, but quite often when people ask my wife about what it’s like to be a minister’s wife she responds, “He was called, but I was dragged.”

Actually, I think that many of us feel “dragged” by the call of God in Christ. The call is often not what we want. It often does not fit into our plans and self-image.

And yet, God in Christ continues to call us. God continues to ask us to take the journey and trust in the fact that it all has a purpose, a glory that is beyond our ability to see or understand.

Ray Steadman told of an encounter he had with a college student after he spoke on campus. The young man came up to him with a “hunger” in his eyes and asked, “How does one become a spiritual man?”

Ray said that he knew the young man was earnest in his question. And so he responded, “That is not your responsibility. You don’t make yourself into a spiritual man. Nobody does. The words you need to hear are the words that Jesus said to his disciples ‘follow me.’”

We live in a world of self-help religion. People have a desire, a hunger to be spiritual. But, Ray was right. That is not our responsibility.

What we need to hear are the words of Jesus when he tells us simply, “Follow me.” We are called to take a journey. We know that it begins with the call of Jesus, and we know that it ends in the Promised Land.

But, we cannot know where the journey will lead us in the meantime. We are just along for the ride!

May God give us courage and hope for the journey.
Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN