

Grace to you and peace, from God our Creator and from our lord and savior Jesus the Christ.

Today the sermon is about call. And the story that we focus on is the story of young Samuel. The back story of Samuel's birth and the circumstances going on in the temple during this time is fascinating. Just open your Bibles to 1 Samuel and take a look. If ever we thought things were simpler in biblical times, this will remind us that life was every bit as complicated then as it is now.

Today's story begins with Samuel sleeping in the temple. His mother, after praying for a son, had promised that she would bring him to the temple to serve, when he got old enough, and had done so. Samuel was serving the high priest Eli whose own sons were corrupt and dishonest.

The description of the scene tells us some things about what life was like in those days.

"The word of the Lord was rare in those days," "Visions were not widespread." It was, despite everything else, a secular age. Kind of like now. People wondered where God was, whether it all might be a hoax. The temple was still there, although the priest was old and decrepit. And the young assistant, Samuel, was tasked with sleeping in the temple, by the ark of God.

Samuel is the focus of the story. He is lying down in the temple, probably asleep or nearly asleep, when he hears a voice, calling his name, "Samuel! Samuel!" Samuel responds, "Here I am!" He is a good boy, an obedient boy, and he immediately runs to the old man Eli, ready to do what he is bid. "Here I am, for you called me."

And Eli denies that he has called him.

It happens again. The Lord calls Samuel, who hears the call but once again misses the identity of the sender, and once again goes to Eli, ready to serve. And once again Eli sends him back, denying that he had sent him.

When it happened a third time—same call, same response, Eli figured it out. He figured out that it was God Almighty who had been calling Samuel, and he instructed him on the proper way to respond. "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.'" And Samuel did.

So when the fourth time came around, Samuel was ready—or at least as ready as he could be—and he responds to the voice. And God says back to him, "See I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle."

Samuel goes on to be a great prophet, at a most significant time in the formation of the faith of Israel. It is Samuel who is the prophet for Israel when they decide that their system of judges is not sufficient and demand a king. It is Samuel who has to negotiate with the Lord to

get them a king, Samuel who is charged with anointing the first king, Saul; Samuel who is charged with dethroning Saul and finding his replacement, David. Samuel, the great prophet who started out the little boy in the temple not recognizing the voice of God, not understanding the call of God, not really having a clue.

This story has resonance for us. We, too, live in a time when it appears that the word of the Lord is rare, and visions are not widespread. We, too, live in a time of great change—social change, political change, climate change, economic change, changes in our religious institutions. We, too, are living in a time when we need leaders, when we need people to hear the call to leadership. Even when it takes a couple of tries.

There are so many ways that people are called. The story of Samuel is just one. But let's take a look at it and see what we can notice. The first thing we notice is we don't always know who is calling. Look at Samuel. He was a well-trained and smart boy. His mother had dedicated him to the temple and he even lived there.

But Samuel did not know who was calling. Three times he went into Eli to respond to the voice that he heard. Three times he thought it was Eli, never dreaming that it was the Lord. I get that. Don't you? You get one thing in your head, and you go with it. It is what is familiar. It is the logical explanation. The text notes: "Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him".

He had lived in the temple, slept next to the ark of the Lord, but he did not yet know the Lord. Sound far-fetched? Maybe not. Maybe its not just a thing from back then and over there. Maybe it is something that we experience in our religious institutions here today, as well. Which is to say that you can go to church all your life, and still have an "aha" moment when it finally strikes you what it is all about.

Samuel did not at first recognize the voice of the Lord calling. And that leads us to our second observation. It usually takes more than once. For everyone who tells a call story about hearing a voice that suddenly turns around their life once and for all, there are 99 others who talk about voices, nudges, inclinations, whispers over the years until they cannot ignore it any more and they admit that maybe they have heard a call.

You may be one of those people. You may have thought about a call to ministry. You may have heard people mention it to you and laughed it off. But maybe there was something that simply did not let you go, did not give you peace until you faced it.

Maybe you are wrestling now. Maybe you think if you don't have the for-sure bolt of lightning experience that some people describe that you are not hearing a call. Think again. And look at Samuel. Three times he misunderstands. Three times. Kind of like Peter denying Jesus three times, and then after the Resurrection going back and forth with Jesus:

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

Or like Peter’s dream in the book of Acts, when 3 times the Lord lowered a sheet full of ritually unclean foods ordering him to eat, and three times refusing, until at last, the Lord proclaims: “What God has made clean you must not call profane.” And Peter got it. Jesus was for all people, not just the ones who has thought of themselves as the chosen people.

Three times seems to be the symbolic number of times it takes a call to get answered in the Bible. But in reality, it often takes a lot more than three attempts. So I repeat: it usually takes more than once.

Our third observation, going back again to the story of Samuel, is that you cannot figure out a true call on your own. It takes help. The way Eli helped Samuel, told him what to say, how to listen. We need other people to help us discern call. We need people saying, “You know, I think you have potential to be a pastor.” Or, “Have you ever thought about ministry?” Not all calls are to ordained ministry. There are so many ways to serve God, both in the church and in the world. As Lutherans we have a robust doctrine of vocation. We believe that God calls us to serve God and neighbor in many ways—from our occupations—our jobs—to our use of resources including leisure time.

We are at a time in our life as a church when we need to be looking around for the next generation of pastors. The baby boomers are retiring. Who will serve? Look around you. Is there a teenager, a retiree, an empty nester, a child in whom you see gifts for ministry? Tell them. Be part of that cadre of helpers who help articulate the call, and who help discern.

In the closing worship at the Synod Assembly, it began with a baptism. We’ve never done a baptism at a Synod Assembly before, but we did today. It was a reminder that God’s call comes to all of us through baptism—young, old, male, female, rural, urban, cradle Lutheran, recent convert. And that is our fourth observation that comes from Samuel, as well. God chose a child, passing over more promising looking candidates. God calls all sorts. There are no barriers to God’s love, to God’s call.

God called Samuel because leadership was needed as his people went through enormous transformation from a wandering people to a people settled.

We are in similar need of leadership for our churches and communities today, as we strive to live out the Good News of Jesus Christ in our daily lives, serving God and neighbor, in a new day, in a new way.

There is a wonderful Tanzanian traditional song that is in the Evangelical Lutheran Worship. It goes:

Listen, listen God is calling, through the Word inviting,
Offering forgiveness, comfort and joy.

Jesus gave his mandate: share the good news
That he came to save us and set us free.

Listen, listen God is calling, through the Word inviting,
Offering forgiveness, comfort and joy.

Listen. God is calling.

Amen.

Written by Bishop Jessica Crist