

Lectionary 2 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

January 17, 2021

1 Samuel 3:1-20; John 1:43-51

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

I've been thinking about this week's first reading with adult wisdom. It's the story that is often known as "The Call of Samuel." It's the call of the boy Samuel. And it's a favorite of churchgoers. It's a favorite of Sunday School children. For any number of reasons. It's a child at their parents' bedroom door in the middle of the night. It's a child eager to please, but not quite knowing what to do. It has the Goldilocks structure of the first time, the second time, and finally on the third time, the old man perceives what is going on. It's an appealing children's story. Not least because the child is the focus, is the hero.

And the story is before us this Sunday to complement the gospel reading. These are call stories. Stories of people being called by God. In January, we are in the beginnings of Jesus' ministry. And Jesus is calling his first disciples. Both today. And in a different version next Sunday. And so an Old Testament call story is summoned forth by the lectionary to accompany the Jesus story. But they are both stories of people being called by God. Called to follow, called to learn, called to discover, called to serve.

The gospel story also contains childlike expression "come and see." This phrase is deployed three times in the beginning of John's gospel. Jesus invites John and Andrew to "come and see." And in today's gospel, Philip says to Nathanael, "come and see." And in another episode, the Samaritan woman at the well will invite her fellow townspeople to "come and see." There is something playful, something childlike in that expression. I've discovered something. I know a secret. Come and see. It's an invitation, not a command. So many people became Christians because they were scared into it. But Jesus never does it that way. Come and see.

So we have this appealing story of the boy Samuel. But I've been reading it with an adult mind. There's a sadness for me in Eli. He's an old man who was not up to the job. And that comes out in the latter part of the call of Samuel. Samuel has been called by God, but the rise of Samuel means the fall of Eli. And this is something that Samuel will be forced to tell Eli about in the morning. It's a very grim moment of reckoning, as well as a very important beginning.

Eli has failed as a parent, and has failed as a priest. He has let his sons profit from his vocation. They are basically stealing from the offering plate, and having sex with the women who work at their little sanctuary. His sons are corrupt. They are religiously corrupt. They are profiting and they are sexual predators. In the house of God. This is all in the previous chapter. And Eli

knows it's bad. And Eli has been given custody of Samuel by his parents Hannah and Elkanah. He's a priest in training. And in a very poignant verse 16, Eli calls out, "Samuel, my son." And Samuel says, "Here I am." So Eli has his scoundrel sons, but he also has a fatherlike love for Samuel. And so in the night, God had been calling out to Samuel. And Samuel reported to Eli, saying "Here I am." But it wasn't Eli. And now, in the light of morning, it *is* Eli. Calling Samuel his son. And Samuel says again, "Here I am." So there is definitely some poignancy.

This moment is also a sort of ending for priests, and the dawn of a new kind of religious leadership: prophets. Eli and his sons are associated with a location, a place called Shiloh, where the old ark of the covenant was kept. And people come to this location to sacrifice, to make offerings, and to pray to God. With Samuel, the power of God will be with the prophet, going from location to location, speaking God's words and doing God's deeds. There are several signs that God is abandoning the priesthood. One of them is in verse one of our reading. The word of the Lord was rare in those days. God isn't giving the priests the words and the visions. There's definitely a passing of the guard here. The old man and the young boy. The old priesthood and the new prophet.

Samuel is reluctant in the morning to tell Eli what God had said. But Eli insists. "Samuel, my son." And Samuel tells him. And Eli seems more resigned than upset. "*It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.*" I appreciate that about old Eli. God isn't doing much with him. But he is wise enough to see and to accept what God is doing with others. When Samuel's mother, Hannah, wanted to get pregnant, she came to Shiloh to pray about it. She was praying silently with her lips moving, and Eli thought she was drunk. He accused her, and when it turned out that she was not drunk, he said, "God bless you and may your prayers be answered." And it was. Eli plays a role. First in Samuel's birth. Then in raising Samuel. And finally, when God begins to speak to Samuel, Eli is the one who figures out what is happening, and instructs Samuel to listen and to obey. Eli plays an important role.

Like I said, I've been reading this story with maturity and wisdom. Reading it as an old man, or an older man. I'm struck by the bittersweet tragedy of Eli. There is the enchanting children's story of Samuel. But there is the darker and sadder story of Eli. And the two are intertwined.

On this second Sunday after the Epiphany, we're supposed to think about being called. In a moment we're going to sing, "Will you come and follow me?" Jesus calls Philip. Jesus calls Nathanael. God calls Samuel. And perhaps we ought to put ourselves in their sandals. And say, "Here I am!" But there's another calling going on today. The call of Eli. His priestly calling to discern what God is doing, and to declare what God is doing. His priestly calling to name it. To tell Samuel to go back and lie down and listen to God. And then having the wisdom to get out of the way. Sometimes your calling can be to let God be God. Let God do God. And you get out of the way. "*It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.*" Out of the mighty scriptures we have before us this morning, that simple declaration seems mature to me. It seems wise. It even seems priestly. "*It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.*"

We don't know much at all about Nathanael. He appears only in this gospel, makes a wisecrack about Nazareth, and is mentioned one more time after Easter. He was called. We don't much about what he did. Philip is called in today's gospel. His big claim to fame is when he said, "We're gonna need a bigger boat." Actually he said, five loaves and two fish wouldn't be enough to feed five thousand people. That's his big claim to fame. We don't know much about Nathanael and Philip. We know a huge amount about Samuel. He was called by God, and went on to have a huge career. His book spans two volumes, First Samuel and Second Samuel. Amazing. It begins in an amazing way, and it goes on through all kinds of amazing adventures. If you like David and the united monarchy, you're gonna like Samuel.

But today I want you to know that Eli was called, too. To point out what he saw. To discern what he could. And to have the wisdom—and I daresay the modesty—to stand aside and let God do God. Helping others to find their call— that's a calling! Helping others to hear their call— that's a calling! Not everyone is called to be a star in their own movie. Sometimes our calling is to stand aside. *"It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."* Amen.