

The Most Powerful Word in the World
1 Samuel 3: 1-10 and John 1: 43-51
January 17, 2021...Ordination/Installation Sunday
Eastminster Presbyterian Church

This story was told during the time the government was ruled by judges, and as one might expect, the mindset of the people became one of judgment. It was a system that failed miserably because, in essence, it encouraged a culture of every person for self. It was a “do what feels good for you without regard for anyone else.” Religion, housed under temple culture, was next to non-existent and society, as a whole, was in shambles. The dark side of life was baring its teeth. In our world today, I would say that this baring can lead to good if as followers of Jesus we always make the choice to introduce the dark to the Light of Christ in hopes of creating a healthier, more just world. In Eli and Samuel’s day, evil appeared to be overcoming good.

It is at this intersection of light and dark that we enter our scripture lessons this morning. The collective actions, or inactions, of the priesthood had made religious order dysfunctional, even corrupt. The adult sons of the priest, Eli, were crooked. They were abusing their priestly privileges and the hurt in God’s heart is real and deep. So deep that God is communicating very little with his people.

Or, more true to the original language: the word of the Lord was “precious” in those days. In other words, for those so hungry to hear from heaven, when the word of the Lord was spoken it was treasured; God’s word was something to hold with hope.

Rare or precious, however we describe it, the word of the Lord was finally heard by one little person, Samuel. It takes Eli and Samuel some time to realize the voice calling out was the voice of God. Sound familiar to you? Trying to figure out if your head or heart are talking to you or could it really be God speaking?

Samuel’s heart was racing. Eli’s more so. Eli knows it is God talking and he knows that Samuel needs to listen. How many conversations have you had with family, friends, even strangers asking them to trust that God’s talking to them? The truth is sometimes we do not want to listen because we know it is not going to be an “easy hear,” this thing that God is asking of us. Certainly the word of the Lord was not an easy one for Samuel or Eli.

Samuel is called to confront the one who has loved and cared for and mentored him. Wise Eli knows in his heart the conversation is coming. After all, he has been teaching Samuel to listen for God’s voice. And what a conversation it is. God tells Samuel that he will undo the status quo, completely upend Eli’s house and the priesthood his sons have corrupted. The old social order will be demolished, and even though Eli has been a relatively good guy, not directly responsible for the corrosive activity of his sons, he will also be included in the destruction because he knew what his sons were doing, and he did not restrain them. He was complicit.

As one commentator said, “Boy Samuel must tell man Eli that God is about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears tingle!” Talk about a tough spot! But, trusting in the precious word of the Lord, Samuel’s gotta do what Samuel’s gotta do. He is being

called to be part of this new way of living on God's behalf; that is, if he is willing to go beyond listening to hearing and doing what the Lord requires of him.

I have a feeling we have been in their shoes. There is a moment when we finally embrace that the voice in our heads, that lump in our throats, that feeling in our guts...is God...asking something of us, calling us to step out in faith, calling us to become a follower of Jesus or to become a more faithful follower.

Maybe we have been or still are, in Philip's shoes, just minding our own business and then-we hear it-Jesus' voice calling out, "Follow me." And we do. Then in our faith journey, we discover that discipleship is not all smooth sailing. But answering the call to follow Jesus has brought an inner peace, even and especially in the middle of all of life's rough waters, a peace that the world cannot give, the kind of peace you want to invite others to experience. Maybe we have been or still are, in the shoes of Nathanael, a bit of a skeptic who asks, with a tad of sarcasm and a hint of suspicion, "Can anything, anyone, good come out of Nazareth? But you still listened, you still felt called to at least "go and check out" this one called Jesus.

The point is-the faithful are still here. Ears have tingled enough to know that God has gotten hold of the heart, the mind, the hopes, the soul. For some the hold is strong, firm, faithful enough that they want to listen more deeply for God's call on their lives.

The word of the Lord may be as rare and precious in our time as it was when Samuel was a boy, but make no mistake it is still the most powerful word in our world. God is still speaking, and we continue following because, from the very pit of our bellies, that seat of emotion in Jewish tradition, like Eli, Samuel, Philip and Nathanael, we want to hear what God is asking of us. We have that inborn spirit that reminds us that our hearts are restless until we find our rest in God.

This passage is always described as one of the many call passages found in scripture. These are stories that detail how a biblical hero or prophet was called and changed by God, how God got their attention, what transpired after that first intervention, what God asked them to do. With the most powerful word in the world still being voiced, I wonder how you or I are being called to be part of God's plan for a new way of living for such a time in which we are living?

Today, we know a bit about how Betty, Blair, Charlotte and Jim have been called. At this time and place called Eastminster they have been called to serve as ruling elders. It was not a quick "yes, God" answer for them. They prayed. They listened for the word of the Lord. They wrestled with the decision, not out of doubt, but quite honestly, because of the human issues and emotions we all would put before God: Is it time for someone else to serve? Do I have the time to fulfill the responsibilities? Do I know enough to make wise decisions? Why me, I am a follower, not a leader? And then, their ears tingled, they listened and now followed through with, "Yes, God! I will serve!"

Samuel has much to teach these incoming elders and us. Not everything we are asked to do as servants is going to be an "easy" hear, but Samuel teaches us how to answer a call when the word of the Lord comes to us, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening."

Philip and Nathanael also teach those around them and us how to answer a call: listen, follow, tell and invite others into conversation with God.

It does not matter whether God got your attention as a tot, like Samuel, or pursued you across the years, like Eli or found you through the witness of friends like Philip and Nathanael, we have been called by the most powerful word in the world, God's word, to be God's voice of hope and Christ's hands and feet.

Some of the most faithful people I know have asked, "But, how can we hear God when it seems the word of God is rare in our day?" I have asked them to repeat their question because they actually know the answer: ...when it SEEMS. The word of the Lord that endures forever is not rare. It can, however, be drowned out these days by so many other voices that fight for our attention. It is precious, though. When our hunger to hear from heaven, outweighs the tendencies to listen to the world, that is when we find God's treasured word of hope!

The call to discipleship is not limited to serving as an elder or pastor; discipleship is a calling for all who believe Jesus to be Lord of their lives. Discipleship is about following Jesus as best we can. It is about learning and living the life he modeled. It is about making the values of Jesus our values. And when we do what the Lord requires of us, with the help of the Spirit, then we too, by sharing the most powerful word in the world, like Samuel, Philip, Nathanael and so many others are part of God's treasured word of hope, pushing back the dark, opening up more light for the world!