

## **“Here I am”**

*The Second Sunday after the Epiphany*

*1 Samuel 3 and John 1*

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*Rev. Leon G. Rosenthal*

Jesus was not a lone ranger! In fact He began His ministry choosing ordinary fisherman. Yes note that in all the Gospels He begins his work in the world by calling a group of 12 ordinary people to drop what they were doing and do what he wants them to do. Something about Jesus made him choose a team, from the first, though on the cross He would save the world by himself. He wouldn't be God alone in the beginning of time and creation, and throughout Scripture, but He chose His own epiphany or revelation in communion with His peculiar people. Seemingly uninterested in experience, character, gifts, and skills of his disciples, something propelled the risen Christ toward manifest losers and knuckleheads and rebels.

As often is the case, the OT and Gospel lessons forge a common theme and message that God's grace takes the form of "Follow Me." The Old Testament foreshadows how the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a peculiarly odd God to chose the Jews. So we come to our first lesson. God addresses Samuel, the little boy working for Eli, the priest, one night, but the

young boy who was the special treasure of Hannah has three strikes against him. In the focus text, strike one Samuel lives in a precarious time when "the word of the LORD was rare" (verse 1). This situation continues the problem from the end of Judges, where "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25), strike two. Indeed, 1 Samuel 2 speaks of how Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas did what was right in their own eyes in their work as priests (1 Samuel 2:11-17), strike three. The times are as dark as the night that falls at the beginning of the story. Symbolically the lamp of the Lord—Epiphany so to speak—is going out.

The boy, Samuel, is bedded down in the temple with the Ark of the Covenant while Eli slept in another room. The boy hears a voice calling and three times arises and goes to Samuel to ask what he wants. Meanwhile, we know that it is God calling the boy, but he does not. Even Eli does not understand what is happening right away. Eventually, however, Eli tells the boy to speak to the Lord. The reading ends at verse ten with Samuel doing as Eli told him. Even in the most evil of circumstances, God speaks through a broken vessel named Eli whose own sons are corrupt while this new outsider Samuel is inside God's heart and mind.

There are several important narrative lines to this story that intersect your and my story, indeed the whole Church today. First is the ease with

which we may miss God's call, or attribute it to a human instead. In speaking of our call, most of us do not describe a major disruption in our lives. Instead most of us speak of a quiet, slow awakening perhaps to a life of service as a reflection of being a “little Christ” in our daily life, as Luther said. Like Samuel, we often tell about a period of uncertainty regarding what we are being called to do or be. We hear the words and see the actions at Baptism, the giving of a lighted candle (I wish we did this) and then saying the words of Jesus, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven.” What a good way to remember that everyday we are called by baptism to follow Jesus.

A second direction is to focus on Samuel as the outsider in the narrative. I identify with this one. Eli's sons are from the priestly line, and it is their birthright to serve in the Temple. Yet, they have not acted justly. As insiders, they have used their position for personal gain instead of service to the Lord. Throughout the Bible, God does not always choose the expected ones. Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and David were all unlikely choices. Jesus calls fishermen and laborers to serve as disciples instead of the priests and prophets of Jerusalem. Power and position in the church or community do not guarantee a similar place in God's world. All, even outsiders, are given tasks in God's kingdom. The many people God chooses here in CLC shows

us that we do not have to have important and powerful people in the world to be the salt and light of Christ in the church, but God will run the church in the footsteps of Jesus, as Peter says. In His footsteps we follow, not our own.

The third point of this narrative is why we chose the longer reading which requires the text to extend to the end of the chapter. Ending at verse 10 misses the most important point of this chapter! Just as moving into the promised land did not guarantee a perfect life, neither does God's call to serve. God's words to Samuel were hard to hear and even harder to speak to others, for they involved judgment against Eli's own children, speaking truth to power. Like Samuel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, God's call often involves confronting systems and tangled webs of death, sin, and demonic—corruption even in the corridors of the Temple and governing palaces. Samuel's call begins a life of confrontation with the people who hungered to be like the rest of the world and to have a king like all the other powerful nations. He had to face Saul and the people who desperately wanted a king, giving witness to their lack of trust in God.

You and I do not have to imagine our connection to Samuel and the situation of His calling. “It's far easier for us to say we care about Jesus' mission of making disciples than to actually do it,” says missionary pastor

Trevor Lee. As Christianity is increasingly marginalized as a “private matter,” a mere opinion, and not describing reality or conveying objective truth, we live under the tyranny of relativism. The word is still rare, maybe even more and more so. Each person is an autonomous individual, which is another way of saying: “My truth is my truth, and yours is yours. So do not force your truth on me!”

Worse yet is that the Christian response to this tyranny of relativism or slavery to autonomous private truth is to become merely tolerant. When we tolerate truth less truths of everybody, the Lamp of God’s truth in Christ dims and flickers near extinguishing. It is a quick step to letting the bullies run the world and maybe even too often the church (we do know that Eli’s sons were known for their intimidations based on their contempt for God’s ministry, see 1 Sam. 2). The situation is further worsened then when the Church becomes an insulated bubble where the hunger and need for truth in the world is gobbled up by the Phinheas and Hophni’s of the church. Phinheas and Hophni you may recall were the sons of Eli who devoured the best meats for themselves, rather than care for the hungry and needy.

The tendency of the powerful to take advantage of the vulnerable is a chief concern of Samuel; likewise, the tendency to make religion about personal security. The bubble is comfortable. There are unwritten rules

about how to be nice to each other, what you can say and what you can't, and the correct answers to life's difficult questions. You know what you're getting. When you go deep with people who don't know about the bubble, you don't know what you'll get and there are no easy answers. It's not easy, as a Christian, to interact honestly with people who are getting hammered every weekend, intelligent agnostics, or guys who spend most of their time at the sports bar. In the bubble you don't have to.

Our discomfort with the discomfort keeps us in the bubble, and it has some serious consequences. From inside the bubble, we look at "those people" from a distance. When you actually get close enough to become friends, you are confronted with the complexity of their lives—their struggles, their beauty, their sin, and their humanity. You can't stereotype anymore. You start to care about them. You want them to trust and love Jesus because you love them, not just because they're "sinners." That is a tremendous shift.

Epiphany is the season that reminds us God seeks the lost, including disciples lost in the security of their religious bubble wrap. Our call is the shape our life takes under the forgiveness of sins. We are indeed forgiven for the sake of Christ, but our forgiveness is not merely a "private security note" that we bank in some safe for the last day as a "get out of jail for free" card.

This is what the parable of the talents reminds us of the man who buried his one talent, while the other two invested the five and the two.

In Africa where the church is growing very fast, the struggle to listen to God's calling is not merely a beautiful song (though that is where the hymn comes from). Last Monday I received a phone call from our missionary in Nigeria, Ivan Raasch. The confrontation with Muslim terrorism has flared up since this past Christmas, with a bombing of a Church. Missionary Raasch spoke of the needs for prayers of protection and bold witness in the living of these days with wisdom and courage in Christ. Likewise, he spoke of the Gospel spreading in spite of the opposition; maybe, because of!

Could it be, as in our Gospel Lesson and our text that God wants to move out of our comfortable bubble of a Church that is really a convenient and self-serving distortion of the Gospel? In neighboring nation on the eve of an infant baptism in some congregations in Sierra Leone, the oldest woman in the family takes the young child in her arms for a guided tour of the village. She walks down the streets of the town, pointing out significant places to the babe in her arms. "Here is the school where you will go to learn how to read. This is the house of your aunt and uncle who will help take care of you. Watch out for this house, because it is full of danger, and you can

lose your way. This is the church where you will be baptized tomorrow and where you will learn the stories of Jesus.” Though the young child will not consciously recall this tutorial, it offers a shared way of life, a map by which the family and community hope to orient themselves and the newest member of their family.

It reminds me of Hannah turning over her son Samuel to Eli, and Eli turning him over to God’s plan. As a matter of fact, it reminds me of the Heavenly Father, turning Jesus loose with His cross lifted high and proclaiming His eternal love. And disciples keep trundling along after Him, bearing His cross. Amen.