

Gates Presbyterian Church

Answering the Call

January 14, 2024

In the world of the church, we talk about our sense of call all the time. We use the idea to understand, both individually and communally, what our purpose is in God's world, what our particular ministry might look like, and how God is speaking to us in any given time and place.

The Bible is littered with call stories from across the spectrum covering the phantastic (Isaiah), the deeply reluctant (Moses), the partially deaf (Samuel), the skeptical (Nathanael) and the sudden (Paul) and all the places in between.

Most call stories include many of the same elements – God's call, a protest about not being qualified or ready or worthy, God repeating the call, some sort of blessing and acceptance. Not all of the stories have all of the elements, of course, but all of them feature God and a deeply flawed human who is being called into God's service.

I know that call stories like Paul's – that sudden blinding on the road to Damascus which turned his life from one of persecutor-in-chief of all Jesus followers to the chief evangelist for Christ's work – these call stories catch our attention with their drama and energy.

However, most of us have call stories that do not include nearly the same captivating narrative. Instead, they unfold slowly over time as we stumble forward into understanding, one muffled and hard to comprehend instruction from God after another.

My call story is no exception. "How did you get here?" people ask me. And I always wonder whether they are disappointed with my reply because it is very simple. It's all my friend Sharon's fault. With a little bit of culpability thrown in there for Chip and my friend Mike.

You see Sharon was the one who told me I should teach Godly Play. Tristan was three and I was looking for a good Sunday School program for him to start. Our church, where Chip and I were serving as cantors, had no Sunday school at all. We had plenty of children but no one seemed interested and even the teachers had quit out of boredom.

But I was determined, and Sharon, who was Tristan's Godmother, was seldom wrong, so I asked my church if they would pay for me to be trained as a Godly Play teacher and, that fall, I started teaching.

To be fair, Sharon did warn me. "Godly Play will change your life" she said. It is on me that I didn't take her seriously, because she was completely correct.

Godly Play did change my life.

Teaching Godly Play involves learning the stories of God's people, the sacraments of the church, the work of the apostles and the life and ministry of Jesus by heart. And there is

something about placing God's word in your heart like that that has a way of changing things.

Before I knew it, I was not only teaching Godly Play, I was also running the entire Christian Formation ministry for a new church. And I was serving as chaplain for mission trips. And I was giving sermons and providing pastoral care and leading Bible Study.

Chip started telling people I was going to go to seminary – an idea I was very opposed to. I was already doing the work, why did I need some extra letters next to my name and anyway, who goes to graduate school with three school age children at home and a husband who travels frequently.

I think you would really like it, said my friend Mike.

Finally, God brought us to Rochester and I said, “really God, Rochester is your answer to what I am supposed to be doing?” And God showed me Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School.

The rest, as they say, is history. And here I am before you today.

Of course, there was a lot of work in between – more than a hundred steps are included in the Presbyterian ordination process that spans four years of coursework including Greek and Hebrew, chaplain training at the hospital, a year of field education, and five exams – and all of it requiring multiple iterations along the way of faith statements and sense of call stories and endless interview questions to write and respond to. But that is all in the noise. The real story lies in the decision to answer the call and do my best to follow it faithfully.

What, I wonder, is your story?

Who has encouraged you to pursue the gifts you have in ways that spread love and compassion and justice around the community?

When have you been invited to do something outside your comfort zone, something you feel reluctant to say yes to but can't stop thinking about?

And who in our community has been inviting us collectively to follow God out into the world?

What suffering or injustice are we feeling called to respond to beyond our walls?

How do we hear God inviting us to use our resources and energy to witness to God's love in the world?

In our denomination, we believe that our call is understood in two contexts – both our internal sense of call – what we feel individually or as a community of faith that God is calling us to be and do – and externally – what the community expresses about their sense that we are the ones God has designated to act and love and be in this time and place.

Last week, we had the pleasure of ordaining and installing this year's leaders of our community – siblings in Christ who have answered God's particular call to serve in various positions as elders, deacons and trustees.

This coming Saturday, we will be gathering for our churchwide retreat where we will continue the work of collectively discerning what God is calling us to be and do in our community.

As of this writing, we have about 40 people signed up to attend the retreat. It has been my experience that God does all kinds of surprising things when we invite God to lead us, and we create space for that to happen with open hearts and minds and the courage to try new things.

Last time we gathered for a retreat, we came up with the idea that has become our Weekend Food Ministry to respond to hunger among the school aged children in our community – a ministry that has now spread to two schools and which is becoming a catalyst for involving other faith communities in the work too. I am so excited to see what the Spirit will lead us toward during our time together this year.

As we prepare for this, and I think about our own context for listening for God's word to us, Samuel's story this morning really resonates with me.

The word of the Lord, we are told, was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out."

If we go back a bit in the story, we see that things are not at all well in God's house right now. Eli, who is charged with taking care of the temple and leading God's people, has failed to rebuke his sons, both serving as priests, who are acting out in all kinds of ways, abusing the power they have, not honoring God and taking advantage of the people. The people of Israel under this corrupt leadership have lost their way. Again.

I feel quite often that the word of the Lord is rare in our days too. Our society, like Eli, may be collectively experiencing our eyesight growing dim. Too often, our leaders are not faithfully caring for the community, instead putting their own desire for power and wealth over the common good.

And yet, discouraging as all this may be, it remains clear that, despite all those things, the lamp of the Lord has not yet gone out in our time either. God's word continues to shine forth and God's voice continues to speak. Hope remains. The question is whether we are ready to hear God's word and to act upon it.

And here is where Samuel offers another wonderful example. Not really understanding yet what he is doing, he nevertheless lies obediently in the Temple of the Lord where God calls to him.

Samuel, Samuel!

Samuel hears God's words, but, not recognizing who is speaking, he runs to Eli to answer the call.

Even Eli himself, who has served God his whole life in the Temple, does not at first realize who is speaking to Samuel.

This is really encouraging to me – even an old hand like Eli sometimes doesn't recognize God's voice. That means that I will almost certainly miss it sometimes too. I don't need to be perfect. And neither do you. And neither do we all together.

The good news is that God is persistent and Samuel is faithful in the small things he can do. In this case that includes only listening his best and responding immediately to the call. In doing so, Samuel creates a situation where he can learn more about his coming call, young and inexperienced as he may be.

Likewise, in this time of uncertainty, when so much is changing and in many ways we encounter only discouragement and despair in the world around us, all we need to do is continue to listen.

What voice creates energy for us?

What need in the world speaks deeply to our passions and the possibilities we see for using the resources we have?

If, like Samuel, we don't recognize God's voice the first time, God will absolutely try again. If we hear and try to respond but start out in the wrong direction, God will redirect us.

This, of course, brings us to whatever message God will have for us when we answer that we are ready to listen. And we do have to intentionally decide that we want to listen – with open ears – no matter what the message may be.

For Samuel, God's first words to him are not wonderful uplifting ones, but words of judgment for the man he has spent his life learning from and serving.

What is Samuel, still a child and only just beginning to learn what it will mean to speak for God, what is Samuel supposed to do with that?

He does the only thing available to him. He answers Eli truthfully when Eli asks what God said to him.

The truth is we cannot avoid the consequences of the things we do, individually and collectively, that fail to honor God and our neighbors. For Samuel, his first job as a prophet is to speak a word of truth and judgment to someone he likely cares deeply about and has been taught to respect and look up to. How wonderful that he does not give up after that and refuse to serve God! We don't get to pick and choose which things we do for God – when the call comes, it comes, and our job is to hear and answer as best we can.

It is true for us too that some of our call may revolve around speaking words of truth into our community about places where we have not honored God's image in every person, causing suffering by marginalizing and dismissing some and privileging and honoring others based on factors that are not in anyone's control.

What do you think God would say to a young Samuel today if God called to him from our sanctuary?

What word of truth would God want Samuel to pass along to us about the way our world is unfolding around us?

Where do we see people abusing their power to satisfy their own greed? Where do we see leaders taking advantage of people on the margins to fulfill their desires?

It is not our job to be political we say. And, in the sense that we are not to be about amassing power and privilege and advocating for our own best interests, that is correct.

But we have to remember that Jesus was deeply political. He was always calling out the leaders of his community who lacked compassion and put greed and power over the needs of the poor, hungry, and suffering. He criticized them in all the ways that their movement in the world harmed others. And we are called to do the same. Our voices must be ones that advocate for compassion and peace, for sharing the fruits of an abundant life with all in our world, for facing conflict with honesty and care and creativity, whether that is a popular stance or not.

Along the way, we may discover that, sometimes, the voices who call to us come from places we discount as unlikely to hold anything of value. Perhaps we exclaim with Nathanael, “can anything good come out of ____” fill in the blank here – can anything good come out of: the deeply poor inner city, a new immigrant's mouth, addiction, street wisdom over an academic degree, someone who did not grow up in the church.

We all have our biases and we, like Nathanael, need to be willing to reconsider whether those biases are actually based in solid fact or whether we are making assumptions.

Nathanael, like Samuel, is a pretty human example of a disciple. He tries to dismiss Jesus when Philip first points him out. Surely, he cannot be worth a second look given where he is from. But Philip is not deterred by this response, he simply answers Nathanael, “come and see.”

Again we hear this verb to see used as a way to understand where God appears in the world.

To his credit, Nathanael trusts Philip enough to go with him and, before they can even get there, Jesus is offering words of welcome and telling all around him that Nathanael is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.

Nathanael is taken aback – where did you get to know me? He asks. Jesus answers simply. I saw you sitting under the fig tree before Philip called you.

And that is all it takes for Nathanael to move from skeptic to believer in Jesus’ life and ministry.

Again, this story feels hopeful to me. Nathanael, replete with his own discriminating biases, is met with calm invitation even as he dismisses Jesus. Despite this clear failure at loving his neighbor as a starting point, Jesus still speaks well of Nathanael, and Nathanael still has enough wisdom to agree to meet Jesus. And he has a discerning enough ear to recognize who is speaking to him once they do meet.

All of this is to say, that we too can follow a winding path to God. We may dismiss the word God would speak to us at first. We may not recognize the value of God’s messenger when they share the good news with us. We may be skeptical that any of this will lead anywhere of importance. But, if we have just enough faith and curiosity and energy, to go forward anyway, then imagine what can happen on down the road?

The really hopeful thing about these call stories, for me, is that they are far from perfect. They do not show some of the characters in a very good light. The main players make mistakes and take a while to understand what is happening. Some of the surrounding community are acting against God in multiple ways. And still, God uses the people and the circumstances to speak to God’s people, to direct the work that needs to be done, to expand faith, to call people together, to warn of consequences and to speak words enacting truth and justice.

At the end of the day, we do not need to recognize God right away. We do not need to have perfect faith and believe everything our theology insists on before we can hear God, see God, and understand God’s message. We can be bewildered and childlike, cynical and

dismissive, ineffective and weak, and still God will speak to us, will persist with us, will offer compassion to us and will lead us when we do recognize that we are being called.

As the new year begins, and we gather to listen for God's word to us, let us commit simply to showing up with willing hearts. Let us agree to listen especially for any unexpected voices from the margins that might carry a wisdom that is new to us. Let us agree to step out in faith, to be willing to try and fail and try again. Let us receive and offer the radical welcome Jesus extends to us all and make it our intention to love and serve in grateful response.