

Epiphany 2(B). I Samuel 3:1-20; John 1:43-51. January 18, 2015.

This is my first opportunity to speak to you as a group since my ordination, and so let me begin by saying thank you. I thought that the service was beautiful, the choirs were amazing, and throughout it all the spirit, faithfulness, and hospitality of St. Christopher's shined through. All of my friends and family commented on how impressed they were with the beauty of our building and the hospitality of the people. So thank you for your presence, your prayers, your gifts, and your very hard work. Thank you for being who you are.

Just a few days after my ordination, it is perhaps understandable that I have the notion of "call" on the brain. And lo, the texts assigned for today feature two remarkable "call stories," two stories that describe how God interrupted the lives of ordinary people and called them into a deeper relationship and a new vocation. I don't think that this is an accident. Last week, we read, prayed, and heard about the baptism of Jesus. Those of us who were here reaffirmed the promises made on our behalf at our baptisms, in the baptismal covenant. And today, we read, pray, and hear about God calling people into service, where their gifts can flourish in the kingdom of God. It is a natural progression. In baptism, God claims us; and that claiming initiates us into a journey of becoming the person God created us to be. Today we go forward from baptism, and explore the ways that God calls each of us to ministry and service—to a vocation.

Too often, we fall into the trap of thinking that words like "call" and "vocation" apply only to super-holy professional clergy. When we do this, we miss a great chance to explore what God has to do with the entirety of our lives. On the contrary, God has given each of us unique gifts and invites each of us to use those gifts in our own specific vocations. One of my favorite writers describes vocation as "the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need."

It sounds simple, but the stories we've read this morning remind us that discerning and answering God's call is usually not straightforward and is rarely smooth. I want us to take these stories this morning as case studies on ordinary people hearing God's extraordinary call. Then, I'll invite us to a program of deeper sharing and exploration of how God has called us to that place where our deep gladness meets the world's great need.

In our reading from the Hebrew Bible this morning, Samuel hears God's call in the night, but he doesn't know what it is that he's hearing. He thinks it's Eli calling him, so he keeps going to Eli to find out what he wants. After this happens three times, Eli finally figures out what's going on and feeds Samuel the line to say the next time that God calls. So the next time God calls Samuel does what he's been told. And God's like, "Well, I've got some good news and some bad news." The good news is that Samuel is being called to be a prophet, and God is going to do great things through him. The bad news is that his first job is to fire his boss and foster father, Eli. And, well, the severance package isn't exactly mouth-watering: Eli's household is going to be punished forever.

Now, probably, few of us will be called to the kind of extravagant ministry that Samuel performs in his lifetime. But I think that this story still tells us some things about what it can be like to try to discern what we are called to do. First, God calls Samuel through the most ordinary means—simply a voice. The voice is so human sounding that Samuel three times mistakes it for Eli's voice. It would of course be easier for us if God always traveled with backup singers and a string section, like the host of angels who greeted the shepherds on Christmas. But most often, God's voice comes to us in a voice that sounds an awful lot like, or even is, the voice of a friend, a parent, a child, a casual acquaintance. This means that if we want to hear God's voice, we have to listen to each other. We could say "listen carefully, because God *might* be speaking to you in

the midst of your casual conversations and daily routines.” But I think it’s more accurate to say “if we listen carefully enough, God *is* speaking to us through the ordinary tick tock of our daily life.”

Second, God’s call is best understood in community. Samuel can’t figure out what’s going on on his own. So he goes to someone he trusts, and gets guidance that in the end allows him to receive the call that God is trying to give him. And here’s the thing: you don’t need a perfect spiritual guide to help. Eli is far from perfect. Just as God speaks through the ordinariness of our daily lives, so we can discern with our ordinary communities—our flawed partners, our flawed friends, our flawed church community.

And finally, stepping up and answering God’s call makes our life more true, but it doesn’t necessarily make life easier. Samuel’s first job is awful: relaying God’s condemnation to his mentor. Hopefully we won’t have to do that, but I think this aspect of the story tells us at least that moments of discomfort do not indicate that we have gotten things wrong. Uncertainty, doubt, and discomfort are normal operating procedure for doing something as wild as following God.

If Samuel’s call involves doubt and uncertainty and three false starts, at least it doesn’t involve outright skepticism and possibly even hostility. When Nathanael, in our gospel story this morning, gets invited to join Jesus’ small group of followers his first response is “Can anything good come out of Green Bay?”

There are some similarities to the calling of Samuel. Again, we have the most ordinary means in the world. Nathanael gets called to follow Jesus through his friend, Philip. No angels, no trumpets, just a friend. And notice that when Nathanael isn’t convinced, Philip doesn’t put together a long and complicated argument. He just says, “come and see.” It’s an invitation—not coercive, not threatening, just the gentlest of invitations to have your life changed forever. And when Nathanael is convinced, it is strangely because Jesus tells him something so banal and normal that Nathanael’s response is hard to believe: I saw you under the fig tree. And Nathanael: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God, the King of Israel!”

I think there are a couple of things this story can add to our reflections on discerning God’s call to us. The first thing that Jesus says to Nathanael is “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” To me, this is a nice reminder that God already knows wonderful things about us that we are prone to forget. And one of the effects of answering God’s call is that these wonderful gifts that we may have, for whatever reason, neglected or forgotten about get called up to the surface. And second, Nathanael is blown away by Jesus seeing him under a fig tree. And Jesus is like, “Really? Wait til you see what comes next.” To me, this suggests two things. First, it’s okay for our story to be a little silly. We will make fools of ourselves sometimes. And second, things get better. Whatever it is that clinches our commitment to live into our callings is the beginning, not the end. So things may change; we may find ourselves following God’s call to places we never imagined.

These are stories of how God called some people to follow God into their ministries, into the fullness of their own lives. Many of us can tell stories of how God called us into something perfectly ordinary and indescribably great. And so I have a proposal: I propose that when Lent starts in a few weeks, we get together each Sunday through Lent and share these stories of how we found ourselves living out our vocation: whether it’s a job, a volunteer program, or a ministry in the home or church. Let’s tell our stories to each other, and in each other’s stories, we just may hear God calling us to a new adventure. What is the good work that you are perfectly placed to do? Where is God calling you to go, so that your gifts can flourish and bring the world joy? Where does your deep gladness meet the world’s deep need? Come and see.