



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Called by God

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Psalm 139:1-6
1 Samuel 3:1-10

Grace and peace to you my friends. After long planning, I am delighted to be with you and anxiously look forward to meeting you however possible.

Louise launched us into this season of Epiphany and we will continue to meditate on the light God shines into our lives and futures. With the common lectionary as our guide, we will pursue a four-part sermon series as we discern the road ahead and God's call individually and as a church community.

In my former career as a corporate consultant, our teams began each project with four questions. Most consulting firms develop sophisticated methodologies, but we found the simplicity of these questions brought us together, helped us delve into opportunity, and cut away the noise.

- Do customers want it?
- Is it, whatever it is, unique and differentiated?
- Do the financials work?
- Is it sustainable?

We'd edit the verbs and nouns to more succinctly describe the client's industry and focus our attention. The questions were never a one-and-done but revisited time and again.

As I think about the church universal and particularly Westminster, understanding the past, and standing at the threshold of our future, here is my first draft of these questions:

- What is God calling us to do, now? We will begin the series by considering this today.
- How do we live out our call this as Presbyterians in this community?
- How can we steward our resources?
- How will we be sustained?

Today's psalter reminds us of our intimacy with God, who knit us in our mother's wombs and knows every word on our lips.

Our next reading from 1 Samuel chronicles Israel's movement from disparate tribes, each led by a chieftain, to be united in glory under King David.

Composed in the tenth century BCE, the ancient writers of 1 Samuel situate the origin of their dynasty in the womb of a barren woman, Hannah.

Childless throughout her marriage, Hannah prays, promising she would pledge any child she bears to God's service. God hears. Miraculously, Samuel is born, weaned, and dedicated to live with the prophet Eli in God's house.

Before I read what comes next, please pray with me:

Dear God, silence the noise around, the constant whirl that distracts us from you. Settle us so that we can be startled to hear your truth. May your holy spirit tune our ears and strengthen our hearts to be faithful followers of Jesus. Amen.

Come with me to this ancient text and listen for God's word as I read from 1 Samuel 3.

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli.

The word of the LORD 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, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

Then the LORD called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and Samuel said, “Here I am!” and ran to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.”

But Eli said, “I did not call; lie down again.” So Samuel went and lay down.

The LORD called again, “Samuel!” Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But Eli said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.”

Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy.

Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if the Lord calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the LORD came and **stood there**, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

When we think of the ancient of days, with tribes caravanning through the Holy Land, a thin place that gave birth to countless faiths, we could image an enchanted space with God’s spirit ever present.

And yet, “the word of the Lord was rare in those days.”

That does not mean silence prevailed. The tribes of Israel argued over which chieftain to follow within their community, if or why they would cooperate with other tribes, and how to protect themselves from the Philistines’ murderous threats.

When God’s word fades and the truth is not spoken, we tend to invent our own idols and create noise.

The new beginning for Israel originates in the dark of the night with a voice calling two people to listen.

Samuel rests next to the holiest spot in all of Israel, the arc of God, and yet despite this physical proximity and the tutoring of the lead priest and prophet, he did not know God. Imagine a youth running in and around our building playing catacombs or any other energy-infused game but is never invited to pray, doesn’t know of God’s covenantal love.

As background, Eli’s sons should have been there, carrying on his work. Instead, Eli’s sons’ corrupt

behavior insulted faith and lured others to follow. What was Eli doing and saying as chief priest if his sons failed so miserably and Samuel remains so ignorant?

At night, God calls. Three times, God calls and Samuel runs to the only voice of wisdom he knows, Eli. Finally, Eli, who hadn't listened or prayed to God, was roused not just from sleep but from his negligence to remember, God speaks. But not to him this time. I can imagine truly *the fear of God* rising within, yet Eli sends Samuel back to listen.

As many times as I've read this text, I'd not noticed until this week, the final time, "the LORD came and stood there." Stood over Samuel.

God persists and finally persuades, no matter how reluctant we are. Have you ever felt God standing over you?

To the backdrop of Israel's tribes bickering and Eli's stained legacy, this story paints a picture of God doing a new thing. Biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann interprets this with, I quote,

God's new thing is not a grand religious act but an invitation to a fresh, dangerous social beginning. All around the innocence of this narrative there were undoubtedly threats, bargains, and cunning calculations.

In the midst of all those seductions is a young boy who can receive a vision, an old man who can embrace the truth, and a life tingles with promise.

A new beginning means an ending and facing what has failed.¹

The lectionary prescribes reading verses 1-10 of 1 Samuel 3 and places the next 10 verses in parentheses as optional. Parentheses usually mean proceed with caution. Those first 10 verses contain a lovely call story of Israel's beginning.

We could read just those verses, tiptoe back to our coffee, and avoid hearing what God says. But, we will forge ahead.

Imagine Samuel lying on the floor, with God standing over him:

Then the LORD said to Samuel, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.

On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house.

For I have told him that I am about to punish his house, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them.

Samuel lay there until morning... was afraid to tell the vision to Eli.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) pp. 27-28.

But Eli called and said, “Samuel, my son...What was it that the LORD told you? Do not hide it from me.”

So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing...

As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. (1 Samuel 3:1-20, selected verses)

That night, fear consumed Samuel, not of God, but how much the truth would hurt someone he loved. This is what Brueggemann alludes to with “A new beginning means an ending and facing what has failed.”

Both of them confronted the end of Eli’s service and both of them participated in this new beginning. Eli demonstrated the humility to be examined by God – albeit through Samuel – and be held accountable. Eli listened to both Samuel and God.

Samuel, found the courage to speak the truth and learn from Eli.

God’s call did not divide them. Instead God’s call put them together on the common path forward, defined by God, not them.

In so many ways, this story serves as a model for our lives today. We have such divides within families, communities, states, our nation...take you pick of what must end for our future to open up.

We cannot twist God's word to accommodate our lives, nor avoid being examined by God.

God holds us accountable and forgives and will continue to love us through the people who surround us.

God's call comes when we least expect it. To those we'd not imagine. And we need each other to interpret what this means for all our lives.

God's call asks us to be both vulnerable and brave as we venture way beyond our comfort zones.

One of the most celebrated definitions of a calling is Frederick Buechner's: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

This iconic statement echoes through the decades.

But let's be honest. Moses, for example, doesn't demonstrate much "deep gladness" when God calls him at the burning bush (Moses sums up the discussion with, "O my Lord, please send someone else!" (Ex 4:13)).

It took hot coals on Isaiah's lips to convince him to prophecy.

In the Gospels, the disciples eventually experience their calling as leading them into struggle, not away from it.

Buechner's formula still expresses divine guidance, but minor editing might describe the journey: "The

place God calls you to is the place where your deep discomfort demands courage for divine goodness to unfold.”²

We enjoy the deep satisfaction only after we take those fearful steps and we witness more than we'd imagined possible take shape and more people than anticipated join in.

This weekend we honor the life and legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

He too carried a message and vision often not welcomed, even by his colleagues. He argued with those who sought to incite violence to accelerate change and he pushed against with those who demanded he just wait and be patient.

One night in Birmingham, around midnight, he received a threatening call: “(I)f you aren't out of this town in three days, we are going to blow your brains out.”

King recalls his first thought was that his newly born daughter could be taken from him any moment.

He bowed his head over a cup of coffee and prayed out loud. “Lord, I am down here trying to do what is right...If people see me get weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak.”

² Inspired by and edited from, “Lamb of God: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Epiphany 2,” *SALT*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/1/4/lamb-of-god-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-2>

King describes an inner voice say “stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even to the end of the world.”³

Thank God, Dr. King trusted that voice.

Not all experiences from God pierce the night.

Sometimes the call comes as part of what we’ve prepared for all our lives.

Eugene Goodman of the U.S. Capitol Police is being hailed a hero by the way he subverted the rioters’ thirst for carnage at the U.S. Capitol last week.

As a former combat infantryman, Goodman knew hostility and provoked the crowd to follow him, away from the Senate floor. To name the obvious, Goodman who is Black risked his life before those rioters, who were predominantly white, bearing symbols of the Confederacy. Usually, clashes do not end well for someone who is Black being pursued by such a mob.

Goodman continues to remain quiet, not wanting to draw attention or more death threats.⁴ I imagine his actions are part of the long path he walked from a call

³ Garrow, David J., *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, Random House, Inc., 1986.

⁴ Rebecca Tan, “A Black officer faced down a mostly White mob at the Capitol. Meet Eugene Goodman. *The Washington Post*, January 14, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/goodman-capitol-police-video/2021/01/13/08ab3eb6-546b-11eb-a931-5b162d0d033d_story.html

to public service, rigorous training, and divine protection. God remains with us.

Like Samuel, Isaiah, and the disciples, and so many people....God's call often involves working to change human systems that are broken, leading one down difficult paths.

Too often when we speak of experiencing God's divine presence or hearing a call, others will think us crazy. And yet, we stand in the long line of those who risked their lives over the centuries to birth the church and this one in particular.

In my short time with you, I've heard staff members describe their work in technology, or administration, and other skills to maintain the business of with a passion for their particular gifts and to this church as a calling. They feel called to serve.

And I've heard elders and other members of commissions and committees describe your professional careers and public lives of working, day in and day out, with an integrity far above your industry's standards. You did not use such words, but I heard you feel compelled to become the best teacher or artist or salesman or executive in a way that honors God's call.

You are telling me stories of Westminster – not just the building but the people.

Your work in Homewood and Haiti, in your homes, and neighborhoods to feed the hungry and care for the

lonely is tiring and demanding work, and I hear you describe a deep gladness.

You have been sharing and I want to hear more of the stories of God's light shining in this community.

God calls us, bringing each of us closer to what God imagined for each of us and wants for all of us.

Closing prayer

You see us like your finest creation, O God. Help us to live into that understanding of who you desire us to become. Thank you shining you light upon our lives, illuminating our hope for the future, and remaining by our sides. Amen.



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