

Our Help In Years Past, Our Hope For Years To Come

Texts: Psalm 90 & 1 Samuel 3:1-10, 19-21

What does it mean to be called by God? Is it something that happens only to a few, or is it part of each of our lives as Christians? This Old Testament text focuses on the call of God, and helps us understand God's call on our own lives.

This reading from 1 Samuel is set early in the life of the nation. Israel had known strong leaders in Moses and Joshua. Then, after settlement in the promised-land, the Israelites are led by a series of judges who rise up during difficult times. At this point, Israel is not an organized nation. More like a loose confederation of tribes. In fact, as the book of Judges comes to an end, tribal wars threaten to tear the people apart. The books of Joshua and Judges demonstrate that things are far from perfect, even though the people are in the land promised to them by God, a land flowing with milk and honey.

1 Samuel opens not in the halls of power, but in the house of a man remembered only here. Elkanah is married to two women, and Hannah, his favorite, is barren. Hannah begs God for a child, and during her prayer at the temple at Shiloh, she encounters the priest Eli who is, at first, less than comforting. accusing the praying woman of being drunk! Despite this initial encounter, Eli tells Hannah that her prayer will be answered. Hannah has her long awaited child and does as she promised. She gives the child to the LORD. The boy, Samuel, remains with Eli at the holy place in Shiloh.

This giving away of the son she so longed for may seem odd to us, and Hannah's promise may appear rash, but the dedication of her son to the Lord is akin to the sacrament of baptism or the dedication of an infant. In baptism, we confirm God's blessing and call upon the life of a child. We affirm, just as Hannah does, that our children do not belong to us, but are given to us by God. All children develop their own relationship with God, and it is our responsibility to nurture that relationship so that it grows as the child does.

It is believed that Samuel was about twelve years of age at the time of this story. The boy 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 rises and goes to Eli to ask what he wants. 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. That last time, Samuel answers the Lord's call with the words, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening". Samuel heard and answered God's call and eventually became a great leader and prophet of the people of Israel. One of the great figures of the Old Testament.

Notice how easily Samuel and we may miss God's call, or attribute it to a human instead. In speaking of their call, most people do not describe a major disruption in their lives. Instead they speak of a quiet, slow awakening—perhaps to a life of service or an injustice that needs to be addressed. Like Samuel, they often tell about a period of uncertainty regarding what they are being called to do or be. Also, Samuel needed Eli to explain to him what these stirrings mean. It often takes others in our lives to aid us in understanding the call that God places before us.

I know that I did not hear a loud, clear voice to some form of ministry. I felt what I call a "nudge" to see what this Commissioned Lay Pastor training was all about. The deeper I got into the process, the more it started to feel like a call. Bob Kaiser was my "Eli", helping me sort through all of the feelings and questions.

Henri Nouwen was a noted scholar, theologian and author, who taught at Notre Dame and Yale. But he started to experience a gnawing need to leave the academic life, to enter a life of service. In his book, *"In The Name Of Jesus"*, he tells of his growing sense of a new call and his prayer for God's leading, *"Lord, I am willing to follow wherever you may lead, **just be clear and unambiguous about it**"*. He finally answered the call and spent the rest of his life serving a community of mentally handicapped individuals near Toronto. He continued to write prolifically, and I recommend any of his books. He was truly a spirit-filled man.

God's call is not always to the gifted, the best and the brightest. Moses considered himself "slow of speech", David was just a simple shepherd. Jesus called fishermen, tax collectors and common folk- not the priests and prophets of Jerusalem. All of us, even outsiders, are given tasks in God's kingdom.

In the early 1800's, a Congregationalist missionary, the Rev. Royal Phelps, heard God's call to leave Massachusetts and travel to the very edge of civilization, to the newly formed Town of Batavia in New York State. It was the westernmost settlement in the state. The Genesee Country was a land of dark forests and hostile Seneca Indians, who interpreted the name Batavia to mean "a place of mosquitoes". In 1801, when the town was laid out, there were 40 families residing here. By 1809, that number grew to over 100 households. After a period of work by Rev. Phelps, four men and eight women heard God's call to found the first church in the community, named the "First Congregational Society in the Town of Batavia". Its organizational meeting took place on September 19, 1809 at the Center School House, which was near what is now Fargo Road. On Sept. 23, a regular church meeting was held at the home of Otis Robinson, where a clerk and a deacon were elected. On Sept. 24, Rev. Phelps preached and administered the Lord's Supper in Jesse Rumsey's barn, probably the first time that communion was served in this area. From these humble beginnings, this present congregation traces its history.

Could those twelve initial members ever have imagined that God's hand would lead forward for 200 years? That generation after generation would hear God's call to faith, to ministry, to love, to service? That generation after generation would answer that call?

"Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations", (Psalm 90 verse 1 in *King James English*) was chosen as the theme and focus scripture for this church's 175th anniversary in 1984. As I looked through the pictorial directory for that year, I immediately noticed how much younger many of you, and I, looked twenty-five years ago. I was also happily reminded of many who have since ended their earthly journey. Last week, Don Iwanicki referred to the "saints that held this church together". Over the generations, there have been many such saints. I have been blessed to know many of them. I am grateful to one of those saints, Sibyl Zorn, for the historical information that is included here. As we look to the past, we can truly say that God has been present here at First Presbyterian Church for all of our generations. God's hand has guided us from the beginning.

Today, we continue the vision of our ancestors, who sacrificed their time, talents and treasure to found this church in 1809, who later purchased the land and constructed this beautiful building in which we worship. They answered the call. They kept going through thick and thin and saw the importance of having this congregation be a place for welcoming, nurturing and equipping people to be disciples of Christ. So, here we stand 200 years later and we proclaim that same vision- a congregation where people are nurtured and sent out as transformed people to join God's mission in this community and throughout the world.

We may be a church in a small community, but God has called us. We may sometimes struggle to balance the budget, heat the building, bring in new members, but God has called us. Isn't that amazing? Isn't it wonderful? God has called us to live and speak his Word, to share the Good News of His love for this world. To do the work of faith- that is to live as faithful people live, serving God and others. To do the labor of love- that is to keep on loving God and others, as Jesus first loved us. We have been called to live in steadfast hope- holding firm to the promises of God made real in Jesus. We have been called to live in the power of Christ's death and resurrection.

This year, I invite you to look back and celebrate the past 200 years of witness and ministry. It is good and appropriate to do so. For, indeed, we have a goodly heritage. **But....**But, (there's always a "but"), we must also look forward and embrace the future. God's call to faith, to ministry, to love and to service has no expiration date. In fact, it is renewed to each generation. God's call is to each and every one of us.

"Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.....May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us, establish the work of our hands for us-yes, establish the work of our hands."

With God's help, may it always be so in my life and in yours. **Praise God from whom all blessings flow.**