

Sermon for Sunday January 14, 2024

What does it mean to be called to God's service?

We've got different examples in today's passages from Holy Scripture: Samuel's call to be a prophet as a young lad, Jesus' call to Philip to be a disciple, the sense of God knowing who we are and what we can and should be in the Psalm. And then there's the passage from 1 Corinthians, with Paul admonishing the Corinthians to stop doing bad things and do good things. It, too, is a call to God's service, but not in the obvious ways that the other passages are.

There is a common thread among all these things: being called by God to do something is complicated and it's not easy to agree to say yes.

Samuel, the beloved and longed-for child of Hannah, is given by his mother into service in the temple, as an aide to old Eli. He hears a voice in the night calling to him. He thinks it's Eli, and goes to him. Eli says that he didn't call the lad. In fact, Samuel hears someone calling him not once, but three times, and it is only on the final call that Eli says, "hey wait a minute. I wasn't calling you. God was. You are to be God's prophet."

Sounds pretty remarkable, but part of the message from God is that God is going to punish Samuel's master, Eli, because Eli's sons were blaspheming and Eli didn't do anything about it. So Samuel gets to be a prophet, a very complicated calling in the best of times, and the very first thing that is going to happen is that he must affirm what God has said about Eli. But the reading just slides by that part of it and says that Samuel turns out to be a good and faithful servant and prophet of God's word. We hear a lot of how he lives into that in the Books of Samuel and in Kings, but suffice to say it's not an easy task.

We hear about Jesus' call of Philip, a disciple called from Bethsaida to serve with Jesus. But the primary character in this Gospel isn't Philip, who has readily accepted Jesus as the Messiah, according to the Gospel of John. Instead, the focus is on Nathanael, a buddy of Philip's, who is quite

skeptical about this Jesus that Philip is going on and on about. He hears that Jesus is from Nazareth, a dusty little village far from anything significant, and he cannot imagine that Jesus is the Messiah, because wouldn't someone important, someone who is the Messiah, be from somewhere where he was exposed to the best of teaching of the Torah, some big city? And so he makes a snarky comment: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

But when Jesus approaches him – can you picture Nathanael girding himself for an argument? – instead Jesus applauds him. "This is a fellow who doesn't hide what he's thinking. There's no deceit in him." He turns the skepticism into a virtue by saying if someone has doubts, they should name those doubts. Jesus doesn't hide from Skeptics, and Nathanael can sense that there's something interesting going on here. He says to Jesus "how can you say that? Where do you know me from?" And Jesus says "I saw you under the fig tree over there, and you were studying Torah, and I saw you before I saw Philip."

This is no magical parlor trick. There's something here that shocks Nathanael into understanding who is standing before him. And he acknowledges that Jesus is King and Savior, to which Jesus replies "pay attention, you ain't seen nothing yet!" Jesus may be from Nazareth but ultimately Jesus is a gift from his Heavenly Father, from a place beyond measure and with gifts beyond measure.

Jesus has called Philip, to be sure, but he has also called Nathanael, a resistant and skeptical person, and now Nathanael's all in, even though as a student of Torah, there's much to cause him concern. But he follows along, and reappears in John's Gospel as one of the disciples who encounter Jesus by the seaside after the Resurrection.

This question of identity – who is Jesus and who am I in relation to Jesus – is central to the portion of Psalm 139 that we hear as well.

*LORD, you have searched me out and known me; * you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar.*

It is a song of praise that we are so deeply and completely known by God that there is no reason to hide or even to worry...and still God finds us useful. Still God engages with us, delights in us, asks us to not just praise him but to act as he would have us act, as difficult as it sometimes may be.

And that takes us to Corinthians. I want to recap a little of what I've told you about Paul's mission in Corinth and his pastoral letters to the community there. It's a seaport city, with all the bad behavior that you might expect in such a city, where sailors on shore leave indulge in all sorts of things, and where the local populace is a part of it, indeed supports it for economic reasons, and where everybody – even some of the people whom Paul turned into Christ followers – act in ways that are anathema to our understanding of what is good and healthy and wise as we live into our own call from God. We hear this writing and tend to focus on the sexual misbehavior, because Paul is so colorful in writing about it. But I want you to pay attention to the first sentence in this passage: *“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything.*

Paul is riffing on a popular phrase among the citizens of Corinth here. “All things are lawful for me.” Let's restate it as “I have the right to do whatever I want to do.” Feels a little different when stated that way, doesn't it? And that may be true, but as Paul adds on, not everything that I can do is actually beneficial, for me as an individual or as a part of a community. He goes for the most attention-getting example he can find – the immorality that is common in this rough and tumble seaport – but's more than just using one's body in an immoral way. It's doing anything that enslaves us and distracts us from being followers of Christ. He is pointing toward the fact that each of us, if we want to follow Christ, must realize that we must make choices that challenge us. If we are enslaved by addiction to food, how can we give ourselves fully to the Christ who

redeems us? If we are enslaved to addiction to alcohol or drugs, how can we give ourselves fully to the Christ who redeems us? If we are enslaved to greed, or immorality, or always getting our way, or always winning, how can we give ourselves fully to the Christ who redeems us?

How, indeed?

And this is the heart of being a follower of Jesus. We don't get to do a half-baked job of being a follower of Jesus. We've got to commit all the way, even though it means we don't get to do everything we might want to do. Being a follower of Jesus offers us a tremendous promise: being united with Christ in eternity. But in the meantime, it comes with a cost. Whether it's being a prophet and saying things that might get you killed, as many prophets were killed, or being a disciple and ending up struggling to keep Christ's teachings alive in a world that still doesn't completely understand him, or whether it's turning your back on the stuff your friends might applaud you for but which distracts you from Christ's embrace...it's hard. Not impossible, because Christ sends his Holy Spirit to guide us and keep us on track. But hard.

Imagine if Nathanael had not confessed that Jesus was the Son of God. Imagine if Samuel had ignored God's insistent call to him. Imagine if Paul had said "those Corinthians, I can't do a thing with them" and let them go down the rabbit hole of their own bad behavior.

But each of these souls, and so many millions more in the generations between then and now, actually said yes to God, despite the cost. And we honor and revere their willingness to make that choice, to do hard things for God and for God's world. May we have the courage to do the same.

Amen.