

Say What ?

1 Samuel 3: 1 - 10, John 1: 43 - 51

Newtonbrook United Church - January 18, 2009



It was late at night when it happened;

a young boy, the caregiver for an old man whose eyesight had become so dim that he could no longer see - the cataracts on his eyes so thick that the light of God's world could not filter through.

The boy heard a voice - it sounded like that of the elderly man. He went to his bedside;

"Here I am!"

I didn't call - go back to bed.

"Samuel, Samuel" were the words the young man heard a second time, and a then again.

After the third time the old man, who we know as Eli, recognized what was happening. That is a measure of wisdom.

A fourth time the youngster heard; "Samuel, Samuel". His response was similar to our response - "***Speak, for your servant is listening.***"¹

I say similar to our response because, in some mysterious manner, we have all heard God's call to be the people of God. That's one reason why we are here today.

For Philip, it was the command of Jesus: "***Follow me.***"² You may have heard God call that way.

Philip, after being called by Jesus to "follow", went to his friend Nathaniel and told him about Jesus. Philip was excited. He spoke about Jesus as the one who had been prophesized for this tiny nation of Israel, on the fringe of the Roman Empire.

¹ 1 Samuel 3:10

² John 1:43

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Nathaniel, like those of us who are skeptical from time to time, asked, "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*"³

Some of us may be like Nathaniel, doubtful that God's call may come from unexpected places, to people who are as human as we are. "Surely you don't mean me God!"

Once upon a time, probably as a result of my Sunday School lessons, I remembered only one category of story about how God calls someone to a ministry. I had learned that God calls people in dramatic ways, and there is an instant response - such as in the extraordinary story of Paul on the road to Damascus; or the story that we heard this morning of Jesus calling Philip to follow him. Somehow I had not learned the gentle story of Samuel. I had not learned the stories of resistance to God's call - such as the stories of Moses, or Sara, or Esther or Jeremiah where they all argued that they were like the people from Nazareth - God surely wanted someone better than them. Many of us, like people in the Bible, ARE LIKELY TO RESPOND TO God's call with a, "Say what?"

Let's remember Paul's encouragement, written to the church in Corinth. Paul compared the church to the human body, saying that each part has an important role, and that none of the parts is more important than any other part.⁴ As a congregation of God's people, we are all called, and all of us have an important role in ministry.

In our Call to Worship this morning, we said:

O God, none of us are the same.
We all have different gifts and abilities.
Yet, you love each of us,
and long for us to love one another."

We know from the stories in our scriptures that God used women and men; frail, imperfect human beings to accomplish God's mission. God had a purpose for their lives. God has a purpose for our lives too! In many different ways, each of us have been called to ministry.

³ John 1:46

⁴ See 1 Corinthians chapter 12

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The story of Samuel from the Hebrew Scriptures, and the stories of how Jesus called his disciples, are important to us. These are just some of the "call stories" in our scriptures. These stories matter because they are our stories. In some way or another each of us has been "called" to follow the Christian path through life. God has called us to be disciples of Jesus. We have responded; **we have answered the call.** We are members of faith communities that attempt to respond to that "call" from God.

You may see Rick Warren on TV this coming Tuesday because he will be leading in a prayer at the inauguration of President-elect Barak Obama. Rick Warren, an evangelical pastor, has written an extremely popular book titled, "The Purpose Driven Life". Another of his books is called, "The Purpose Driven Church." Although my paperback copy of The Purpose Driven Life has 334 pages, the message is simple - God has a purpose for your life; my life; all of our lives - AND our life as a community of faith.

What is it that God has called you to do with this wonderful gift that we call life? How have are you using your God-given gifts to make this world the world of God's dreams?

I believe that the purpose of our lives - individually and as communities of faith - is to share LOVE! We are called particularly to share love with those who have been marginalized by the powers of Empire. In theological terms, my theology fits in with the theology of God's "Preferential Option for the Poor."

One of the theologians who had a profound impact on theological thought in the previous century was **Karl Barth**. He is frequently quoted as saying that preachers ought to hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Faith is NOT divorced from the world where God calls us to live.

As I said last week, how we live is called our spirituality - individually and collectively. That is a name for how we respond to God's call.

Maria Harris is an author who has a very deep understanding of living a life grounded in the spirituality of Christianity. Her definition of a contemporary Christian "spirituality" is:

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"a way of being in the world that demands even deeper involvement and immersion in the world than is usual, drawing on the belief that everything that is, is holy - although not yet completely so."

She writes that,

"Many who practice it (this Christian spirituality) believe that this was the spirituality of the people from whom Jesus came, of Jesus himself, and of the followers of Jesus." ⁵

I can imagine that I see Maria Harris holding her Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other. So let's turn to the events of the coming week.

The war in Gaza is continuing. I remember the words of a South African by the name of Desmond Tutu:

"When two persons are engaged in a conflict and one of them is considerably stronger than the other, to be neutral is not just and fair and impartial because to be neutral is in fact to side with the powerful." ⁶

How do we share our love; how can we be examples of the love of Jesus rather than just being observers of this conflict?

Monday will be celebrated as Martin Luther King Jr. Day in the United States and many will be exalting King's prophetic speech - the one that we call "I Have a DREAM." Not so many will be re-reading what I think is his best challenge to the Christian community. It is his "Letter from Birmingham Jail", written on April 16, 1963.

That letter was written in response to eight prominent "liberal" clergy, all white, who had published a letter calling Dr. King to allow the battle for integration to proceed through the court system, rather than following the path of nonviolent resistance.

⁵ (Harris, Proclaim Jubilee, p.75)

⁶ (Tutu, Hope & Suffering, p.39)

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It is a long letter; it is profoundly Martin Luther King Jr; it is inspiring for all who seek God's justice. A small part of that letter - combining newspaper and Bible - reads as follows:

"In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, "Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern," and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular. So here we are moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading (men) to higher levels of justice."⁷

Peter Gomes is a leading theologian at Harvard University. In a book that is called, "The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus", he writes:

"When Jesus came preaching, it was to disturb the status quo."⁸

When Christians answer a call from God, bring their faith into God's world, and follow that spiritual path, the world can be changed!

- Does anyone here believe that the preaching of people like Martin Luther King Jr., and his involvement in the political process, had an effect on ending the evil of segregation in the United States of America?
- Does anyone here believe that the preaching of people like Desmond Tutu, and his involvement in the political process, had an effect on ending the evil of apartheid in South Africa?
- Does anyone here believe that in Canada we need to speak out about the evils of racial injustice, war as a normal part of life, and the marginalization of the poor?

All of us, both individuals and communities, have a purpose in life.

- Some of us may be like Nathaniel, doubtful that God's call may come from unexpected places in our lives.

⁷ "A Testament of Hope", page 299, James M. Washington, ed.

⁸ Peter Gomes, The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus, page 240

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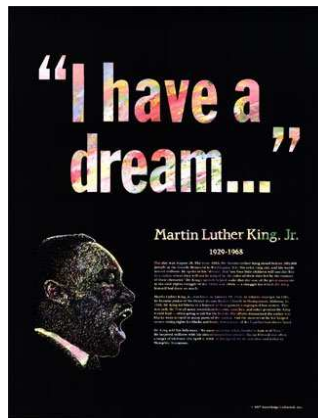
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- Some of us may be like those who felt that God could not possibly use them - not me God! You want someone who has better gifts than me. I'm too young - I'm too old.
- Some of us may be like Samuel, needing to hear God calling over and over again.

Still, God has called each and every one of us.

What a blessing it is to be used by God for God's purposes, just like in today's scriptures where God called Samuel and Eli, Nathaniel and Philip.

Hymn # 509 - I, the Lord of Sea and Sky



Prayers for God's Family and Creation - January 18, 2009

O God of love and mercy, we have been called on this first day in the week for Christian unity to prayer and community. We all give thanks that we have been called - like Samuel in the night, the Lord God has called us to be prophets; and like Nathaniel under the fig tree, Jesus has called us to be disciples. Northminster and Newtonbrook were called to worship together on the first and last days of this

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special week devoted to ecumenicalism. We heard the call and answered. Many were called to assist in the worship this morning. They have heard the call and answered. When like Samuel we hear the call let us be ready to say "Here I am, Lord; Speak for your servant is listening."

When like Nathaniel we have doubts of your call, O God, help us to experience once more the power of your love and the excitement of fulfilling your message to follow Jesus. Help us to understand how to use our faith and spirituality to enrich and enhance the life of our two churches, the life of the Willowdale community and the life of the world beyond us. Show us what it means to live and work together, to be faithful to the call, to find your purpose for us and to help others. We look forward to participating in creating the vision of the world to come.

We pray for those whose stories we have heard on the news this week, particularly events in Gaza. We pray for the new American President who takes office on Tuesday. May the power of your call, through our prayers and our love, touch the lives of all those in need:

- those who are ill or recovering from illness,
- those who are grieving the loss of loved ones
- those who are saddened by the difficulties they are facing in their lives
- those who are lonely or feel abandoned
- and those we name in our hearts and minds.

Let us take a few moments for silent prayer to remember those in need.

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O God, how happy are the modern Elis, Samuels, Philips and Nathaniels who trust in your call. Help us to work for Christian Unity and to build your vision of a world where there is justice for each person and all creation. A world where divisions created by borders, racism, religion, sexual orientation and indifference are no more. We at Northminister and Newtonbrook are your family and we are called to care for each other and the world you have given us. Help us fulfill this purpose. May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with us. Amen

Prayer by Henry MacLeod