

## God calls all of us to ministry

A sermon preached at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA  
by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, January 14, 2018

The Second Sunday after Epiphany, Year B, 1 Samuel 3:1-20, Psalm 139:1-17; John 1:43-51

*1 Samuel 3:1-20 (NRSV): 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 he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he 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 he 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. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he 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." 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, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever."*

*Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him." As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.*

Last week, we commissioned new vestry members and officers. We also commissioned new brothers in Christ through Holy Baptism. This week, we hear about the call of Nathaniel and the call of Samuel. This is the perfect occasion to sing the song "Here I am, Lord!" As the Psalm points out, and the reading from First Corinthians indirectly points out, God knows us intimately. And with that knowledge, God calls us to ministry.

Perhaps you've heard the story of Samuel's call before, but let's look at it in a little detail. The boy Samuel is serving the priest Eli in the temple. God calls to him "Samuel! Samuel!" Samuel repeatedly runs to Eli to say "Here I am!" Eli eventually catches on that this is God calling the boy, so he tells him to listen for God when he calls again. I like this, by the way: Samuel tests his calling by seeking affirmation from someone else—always a good practice in discerning God's calls. In this case, Eli helps to direct Samuel closer to God's vocation. When God calls him again, Samuel's response is the faithful response of so many to whom God calls: Moses: "Here I am!" Samuel: "Here I am!" Isaiah: "Here I am!" Mary: "Here I am!" Samuel is open to God's call, submitted to God's will for him, and he willingly responds.

Clergy are used to hearing the story of Samuel invoked to describe God's calls. Sometimes God is dramatic in this way, but usually, God's dramatic calls come after a long, steady and subtle

coaxing to develop in a certain direction. One priest I know<sup>1</sup> said that for years he waited to pursue ordination because he figured that only those who heard “Samuel, Samuel!” were legitimately called to ministry. But he discovered that God’s steady, quiet voice kept whispering in his ear; his hand kept tapping him on the shoulder, drawing him forward.

What is interesting about this call is that Samuel is not called to the priesthood. Samuel is called to be a prophet. Eli is the priest in the story, not Samuel. The first order of business in this boy Samuel’s calling is to confront Eli the priest, who has raised Samuel like a son in the temple. Samuel must confront Eli because Eli has not restrained his sons, Hophni and Phineas. Eli’s sons were blaspheming God and corrupting the temple practices.

So Samuel is called by God to confront Eli. Eli is the boss—Eli is like a father to Samuel. Eli tells Samuel strictly to tell him everything God said. Can you imagine being in a situation like this? How intimidating! But Samuel accepts his calling, and he tells Eli the message of judgment that God gave him. He tells Eli that Eli is in big trouble with God for his lack of discipline with his sons. Eli sees that Samuel truly speaks the word of the Lord, and he accepts this judgment. Samuel goes on to be recognized as a prophet by the whole nation. The scripture reads “As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him, and let none of his words fall to the ground. All Israel...knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.”

Tomorrow we will celebrate the life and ministry of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was a man whose words did not fall to the ground. When the world around him was full of polarity and animosity between groups, Dr. King called people to love—even to love those with whom we disagree—to show the love of *Jesus*, the love with truth and the love with sacrifice. Dr. King made a difference because people were willing to turn away from malice and name calling, and to love as Christ loved us. And so, God did not let his words fall to the ground.

Who do you know whose words God never lets fall to the ground? Who do you know who is a “trustworthy prophet of the Lord?” You see, God calls some people to ordained ministry, but God calls all of us to ministry—not just those odd enough to get the funny collars. Samuel was not called to be a priest, and yet his ministry was vital to the work of God. Dr. King’s ministry made a difference because it was shared by thousands of ordinary Christians. Who do you know—lay or ordained—who has brought God’s ministry to you?

I’ll give you an example of the ministry of lay people. Stephen Ministry is one of the countless ministries here at St. Peter & St. Paul. Stephen Ministry is almost completely led by lay people. Lay people train as leaders. These leaders recruit and train lay people of the church to be Stephen Ministers. These Stephen ministers spend 50 hours in training, and then meet each month for continuing education and peer supervision, so that they are prepared and supported for the ministry they do.

And what a wonderful ministry this is! Stephen Ministers meet one on one with other lay people to be a companion through a crisis or rough patch in life. Men meet with men; Women meet with women, usually once a week for an hour in confidential conversations. They are not clergy, they are not counselors in this role, they are not therapists or doctors or lawyers in this ministry. They

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<sup>1</sup> My father, the Rev. David W. Pumphrey, ordained in 1955.

are not cure-givers (for only God is the cure-giver). But they are *care givers*, bringing the light of God's grace to people clouded over by stress or sadness. Stephen Ministers listen and pray and share the good news of God's love. Some caring relationships go on for a year or more; some are more brief, as a person's needs change. Some Stephen Ministers were once care receivers themselves, discovering the blessings of a caring ministry to the normal ruts in the road of life.

Stephen Ministers are not clergy. And yet they are called to this ministry because they have gifts that clergy often lack. Clergy do not have all the spiritual gifts—on the contrary, our ministry is focused and limited in comparison to lay ministry. You all have access to people in life that clergy do not. God called me and Elisa and Bishop Don to ordained ministry. God called nine people to train this year to be Stephen Ministers. God also calls each of you to ministry.

Does that sound crazy to you? It shouldn't. To be a Christian is to be a Christian Minister. To be a Christian Minister is simply following God's call as a Christian. We are all called into ministry for each other and ministry in the world. When we are baptized, we take vows for ministry, "to represent Christ and his church... to seek and serve Christ in others... and to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ."<sup>2</sup>

Your calling may not involve 50 hours of training. You may simply be called with the resources that God has already given you. God's grace is alive and active in quiet ministries that don't often get noticed. And yet so many people are blessed by the ministry of those who knit prayer shawls, or those who send hand written cards. Everyone in a Bible study knows the value of that passing comment offered by a colleague that makes an amazing connection between the scripture passage and that person's life.

I cannot tell you how valuable is the ministry of those who simply prepare a meal or share a conversation with our homeless guests at Family Promise. You have no idea how priceless a gift you have to give until a child hears you share a story about Jesus for the first time. Every smile and personal welcome to a new face is a powerful act of ministry. Often, ministry is simply good stewardship of the resources you have and the circumstances you are in.

After all, the church is not the only place for ministry. Rather it is the practice ground for ministry in the world. God may be calling you to reach out to that co-worker with the serious diagnosis, or that loner in the lunch room. When your words are words of God's grace, like Samuel's words of truth, they will not fall to the ground. They will make a difference, whether you know it or not.

Each of us—each of you here today—is equipped with the grace of Jesus Christ. God gives us this grace to share in the world around us, and we have plenty and to spare! Your calling to ministry may get a lot of notice in the church, or no one may see how you reach out to that teacher, or encourage that plumber, or pray with that neighbor. But God's grace flows as freely in those encounters as in any service in the church.

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<sup>2</sup> See the Book of Common Prayer, page 855 and pages 304-305.

How has God called you to share the grace of Jesus Christ? Have you heard that dramatic “Samuel, Samuel!” calling you to serve? Or are you starting to notice God’s gentle yet unrelenting tap on your shoulder to use the gifts he has given you?

See how Samuel was open to God’s call—humble, yet faithful enough to trust God when he was called? See how Stephen Ministers answer God’s call to love others with skill and service? See how regular Christians share God’s grace at just the right time in just the right way? So likewise, see how God calls you to ministry. God has given you everything you need. You only need to discern and answer that call.