

**Sermon: Calling All Disciples**

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

14 January 2018

Based on **1 Samuel 3:1-20, John 1:43-51**

We have here two call stories, and there are many in the Bible. The two passages we heard today have something in common, which might be one reason why the lectionary pairs them together.

We can understand the Samuel story pretty much as it stands, but there's some interesting background to it. A few weeks ago, when we were talking about Mary and Elizabeth and their miracle pregnancies, we mentioned Hannah as one of those other women blessed unexpectedly. Hannah was Samuel's mother. When he was born and after he was weaned, they brought him to Eli in the Temple at Shiloh. And Hannah said, 'For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore, I have *lent* him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord' (1 Samuel 1:27-28). And they left the infant with Eli. Each year, Hannah made Samuel a new robe and gave it to him when they came to the Temple to make their annual sacrifice. In time, Hannah bore three more sons and two daughters.

The books of Samuel – two scrolls, really – describe how Israel came to have kings. In his career, he served as a priest, a prophet, and as Israel's last judge. Samuel himself stand as a bridge from the time of the judges to the monarchy. It was Samuel who anointed both Saul and David as the first two kings of Israel. So, he is sort of a big deal in the Bible, and, as the story of his call might give us insight into our own calls to serve, it's a good idea to examine it a little.

When I first read this passage, I thought to myself, '*What is going on in the House of Eli?*' If we back up a bit, we learn that Eli had two sons, Hophni and Phineas, who were both priests of the Lord. But there was a problem: the sons of Eli were 'scoundrels' (2:12). They were corrupt and unfit to follow their father. Eli knew all this. He talked to them about it, but they ignored him. Finally, 'a man from God' came to Eli and said,

basically, ‘Watch out; the Lord’s mind is made up: those two are going to die on the same day as a sign to you (2:27-36).’

Meanwhile, Samuel grew, and earned both divine and earthly favor.

This part of the story is important because it serves to validate Samuel’s call. Once Eli realizes that it is the Lord calling Samuel, he commands the boy to tell him everything that the Lord had said, but Samuel is reluctant to share bad news. Eli persists, and when Samuel tells him what the Lord had planned for Hophni and Phineas, Eli knew that this was real. Samuel was telling him things that only Eli would know, and the boy could only know them through God’s revelation.

We find the same thing in the passage from John’s Gospel: Jesus tells Nathanael things that only Nathanael would know. At first, he’s kind of snarky: ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth’ (John 1:46), a sleepy little backwater town in Galilee? Apparently, yes. For Nathanael, Jesus is revealed as the Son of God, just as God is revealed to Samuel, who serves the Lord his whole life.

Imagine the conversation if God had tried calling me in the same way as Samuel. Sometime before dawn, there’s the Lord calling, ‘Steve! Steve! Steve!’ and I roll over and say, ‘**What??!**’ End of conversation. For now.

I think we all have a call story or we’re waiting for one, or we wouldn’t make a habit of going to church. We can respond reluctantly, more like Jonah than Abram; or sleepily like Samuel; or immediately, like Philip and Nathanael. But respond we will.

Here’s how it goes: Jesus calls his disciples. He knows their faults and limitations – and their gifts – even if they do not yet know them for themselves. Philip and Nathanael were just hanging around, minding their own business, when Jesus came along. In all four Gospels, the called ones drop everything to literally follow Jesus.

There’s an urgency in Jesus’ call: ‘Follow me.’ There’s no time to waste. There’s no elaborate training program, just go and do. The call is always there; we just don’t always listen, or we refuse to hear it, or make excuses for not responding

Let’s say you do respond. And then, one day in your ministry, you find someone who desperately needs help and you can’t give it, for one reason or another. What do you do? Move on? Or find another way? Jesus says if one out of 99 sheep are lost, go find the one, no matter what. It’s your job. It can be painful if the results aren’t there though.

In Hebrew, the phrase ‘Here I am’ is one word – *hineni*. It can also mean, ‘At your service.’ This is the word used by most people in the Bible when they respond to a direct call from God, people like Abram and Jacob in Genesis and Moses in Exodus.

Abraham Heschel once said, ‘When living true to the wonder of the steadily unfolding wisdom, we feel at times as if the echo of an echo of a voice were piercing the silence, trying in vain to reach our attention. We feel at times called upon, not knowing by whom, against our will, terrified at the power invested in our words, in our deeds, in our thoughts. In our own lives, the voice of God speaks slowly, a syllable at a time.’ (*God in Search of Man*, 174)

As God speaks softly and slowly, maybe we can respond in this way, ‘*Here I am* in this precious moment of my life. *Here I am* in this sacred spot seeing the Glory of God filling the world. *Here I am*, grateful for my life at this moment, grateful for the beauty all around me wherever I am. *Here I am*, [...], at Your service!’<sup>1</sup>

As difficult as ministry can be, it’s easier when an entire faith community engages in it together. Without presuming anyone’s faith tradition, I believe we are all called to serve, both as individuals and as a church. New North feels called to help people stay warm in the winter, and now we feel called to help people recover from addiction safely and securely. The key part of that sentence is this: New North feels called to help people.

We have several active ministries here and they all will continue. But when we were shown a new one in the form of Katherine House, it made both of our collective ears tingle. It’s God calling; who are we to refuse?

There is one more interesting use of *hineni* in the Hebrew Bible. In Isaiah, there are several passages where God says that there will come a time when, if we act ethically, *we* will call out and *God* will respond, ‘Here I am!’ (Isaiah 52:6; 58:6-9; 65:1). If we answer God’s call, then God will be with us as a partner in repairing the world.

Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://jewcology.org/2011/11/here-i-am-responding-to-the-call-in-creation/>