

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: January 17, 2021 Year B, 2nd Sunday after Epiphany and Ordinary Time

Reconciling in Christ Sunday

Text: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

Title: Listening and Living It Out

First Reading: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

¹Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

² At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the 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. ⁴Then the LORD called, 'Samuel! Samuel!'- and he said, 'Here I am!' ⁵and 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. ⁶The 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.' ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸The 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. ⁹Therefore 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.

¹⁰ Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'

The Baptism of Jesus—Identity and Call/Mission/Purpose

I briefly want to make a connection to last week's sermon theme: We talked about **identity** and how knowing who you are and to whom you belong leads to understanding and living out one's **mission and purpose**. Specifically . . .

- In his baptism, Jesus was identified as God's own beloved son.
- This identity led to his mission and purpose. As presented in Mark, which we read last week, his baptism leads directly to his temptation in the desert and then his public ministry and call of the disciples.

Call and Discernment (The story of Samuel and Eli in 1 Sam 3:1-10)

Recognizing that call and figuring out what it means or beginning to explore its dimensions.

Though this week's texts are not directly linked to last week's, there is a connection in the progression from identity to call and mission or purpose.

Today in the OT text from 1 Samuel and the Gospel reading from John we have examples of "Call Stories." What do we mean by the use of the term "Call?"

One pastor and writer whose insightful yet practical way of describing things says this about call or *vocation*:

- The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done.¹

Call stories have common features which make them identifiable. **Examples of particular people in scripture and their call story:**

- Moses with burning bush in Exodus 3
- Mary, mother of Jesus when Angel Gabriel came to her in Luke 1.

Common features of call stories in scripture:

- **An encounter of some kind**
- **Initial surprise, expression of unworthiness, confusion on the part of one being called.**
 - **Moses:** First he says, I must turn aside and look at this great sight—why they bush is not burned up.” (Ex. 3:3)
 - Later he says, “Who do I say has sent me?” and “I don’t know how to speak.”
 - **Mary:** “How can this be?”
 - “But she was much perplexed by [Gabriel’s] his words . . .” (Luke 1:29)
 - ³⁴Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke :34)
- **Some reassurance or tangible sign of the call**
 - Angel Gabriel to Mary: Reassured her not to be afraid, explained about the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit, and provided the sign of the pregnancy of her relative Elizabeth, who had previously been barren, that “nothing [is] impossible with God.” (Luke 1:30-37)
- **Sometimes once this initial reaction is addressed by the reassurance or sign, we see amazing receptivity:**
 - Mary, who said, “³⁸Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38).
- **Sometimes we see continued resistance, sometimes displayed quite vigorously.** Stephanie is leading 2 different women’s Bible study groups studying **Jonah**. Jonah is so opposed to hearing and following God’s call to go to preach to the people of Nineveh that instead of traveling there he gets on a boat and heads in the opposite direction.
 - If you know that story, you know that God continues to persist with God’s call and Jonah continues to resist. He’s angry and resentful throughout the story.

¹ Frederick Buechner, “Vocation,” July 18, 2017. <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2017/7/18/vocation>

Samuel and Eli

In this story of Samuel and Eli, there is receptivity on Samuel's part. With Eli's guidance, he understood that it was not Eli himself calling him, but the voice of God. That understanding and reassurance from a mentor led to Samuel's response,

- "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:9)

But this call was not easy to live out, either: Though we didn't read the text immediately following this call, there is a brief description that this call will have some painful consequences:

- This is a start of a leadership transition to come in which God will use Samuel to carry out some consequences for Eli that will be difficult for Eli.

Just briefly, Eli's sons are both priests who are supposed to be supervised and appropriately held accountable by Eli as their father and as the high priest. His sons have been disobedient, greedy, and unjust, (See 1 Sam 2); they're described as "scoundrels" who had "no regard for the Lord of their duties as priests" (1 Sam. 2:12-13). Eli has failed to hold them accountable.

So, you can imagine that carrying out this call, which would have been detrimental to Eli and his house, would likely have been difficult for Samuel—the text in v. 15 even says "he was afraid to tell the vision to Eli." He had an apprentice-mentor sort of relationship with Eli. And yet he follows through. And Eli, to his credit, urges Samuel not to hold back, but tell him the whole vision (v. 17). Eli, again to his credit, saw this a word from God and accepted it (v. 18).

Good Shepherd's Story: Discerning its Own Call

Today we at Good Shepherd celebrate ***Reconciling in Christ Sunday (RIC)***. Good Shepherd is a Reconciling in Christ congregation, which means which means that we seek to offer an intentional welcome to those who are LGBTQIA. (An acronym or abbreviation which refers to those who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, or Asexual)

In the context of today's scripture readings with their focus on call, the process of listening and discernment, and the challenges of living that out, let's shift our attention to our own heritage and this particular call.

Just as I've described through the story of Samuel and Eli and references to other *Call Stories* in scripture, there is a process by which you as an individual or you as a congregation or other group recognize, hear, and sort out that call and seek to make sense of it. The name that we give that reflection process is ***discernment***.

Back in January of 2013 Good Shepherd leaders initiated an intentional period of self-reflection about becoming an RIC Congregation which included reading, discussion groups, and other feedback sessions.

Here's how the chair of that RIC Task Force, Pr. Jim Heinemeier, described a component of that discernment process in a communication to the congregation:

- *As we consider becoming a Reconciling in Christ congregation it is important that we have good conversations with each other and throughout our congregation. The members of the RIC Task Force are taking the lead in writing some of their thoughts, but please know that **your stories and opinions will be welcomed and published also.***

That discernment period culminated in the development of a Welcome Statement² which we used today in our Call to Worship.

As described by Pr. Jim, one of the components of the listening and discernment process were these personal reflections from individuals, which were shared with people in discussion groups and presented as written reflection as a handout you could read before worship.³ They were called "Discussion Starters" and the invitation was open for anyone to provide a reflection. Here's one that came later in the listening process:

After reading several weeks of writings from our Good Shepherd family, one might think "Why do we need to do this? Why make this very public proclamation? We already support gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered people. We're that open already."

As you look around this sanctuary, this church, you may know some of the GLBT folks that call GS home. But, what about the ones that aren't here? What about the poor high school or college student whose family has shunned him/her for telling them they are gay? What about the mom/dad that has kids and is confused about their own sexuality? What about the youth or adult that has been told again and again that what they feel doesn't matter, God sees them as an abomination? They can't find us. They need us. Maybe more than anyone. There has been systematic and painful exclusion of GLBT people from the church. The large world church. And, God still loves them. And they need to be able to google "accepting church" and see "Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, Nevada" on the search results. They need to walk into this building and see a sign of some sort that tells them "you don't have to be afraid here. We're going to love you just like we love everyone here, even if we don't agree with them."

I know you love me. This isn't for me. It's for those out there that are afraid and scared and have been damned (like me) and need a public statement of our loving arms as God's expression of love here on earth. - A Good Shepherd member

Another Congregation's Story

- *Insert video clip from St. John's Lutheran in Jacksonville, FL⁴ from Reconciling Works video.*
- Pastors and members respond to the question "How has the RIC journey enriched your community's faith life?"

² Formally approved by the congregation in 2014.

³ Kent Kubista described the worship handouts to me in a conversation Jan. 10, 2021.

⁴ YouTube link: <https://youtu.be/q7ujMW0i9F0?t=281>

- “The feeling here is what kept me here. I don’t feel like a stranger.” :33-:43
- Taryn: She speaks of how the church congregation has walked alongside her and says “It has warmed my heart so much to see them on the front lines. My own family wouldn’t do that for me. It’s a lifesaver. It’s a moment when you feel what’s God’s love truly is.” (Clip from 3:23-4:11)

Both of these stories, our own at Good Shepherd, and this congregation in Jacksonville, FL, are the result of a discernment process of hearing and understanding God’s call. Then they lead to a creation of a welcome statement that says, essentially, “This is who we hear God calling us to be and do and this is how we intend to live that out.”

- That Welcome Statement is what we affirmed today in our **Call to Worship**, what you’ll see on our website, what was printed each week during in-person worship in our *What’s Happening* handout, and what you’d see represented by our banner and printed materials in our Welcome Space outside the sanctuary.

Of course, a declaration like this must not be just stated in writing, as important as that is, but lived out in how we relate to others.

We have **Prayer of Confession** in worship because we also recognize that we are characterized by brokenness we call sin that causes us to fall short of that call that God intends for us. And so, in a Prayer of Confession, we acknowledge that we are bound by fear, suspicion, ignorance, and self-centeredness that limits us as we seek to fully live out that call.

If we feel a sense of welcome within this community that affirms for us that we are “a beloved child of God,” (which was the affirmation we made last week), then it may be hard for us to recognize that not all may feel the same sense of welcome in this place as we ourselves do. So, it’s an ongoing process or a relationship of living closely with God and hearing and responding to that call, seeking God’s forgiveness, and asking for grace from one’s neighbor.

Just this past week I received an email from a newcomer to Good Shepherd relaying her own experience of welcome. She and her husband currently live out of the area but have worshiped with us in-person when visiting family here. They have connected with us online. Here’s their impression:

- “We have always been impressed with your commitment to caring for the downtown Reno community and willingness to take on social causes that are not always easy and comfortable.”
 - She explained that they have experienced some changes in the church they had attended in their home community and said, “When we have attended Good Shepherd, it reminds us of what we have been missing [in a church in our own community.]”

No church is perfect and Good Shepherd is flawed like every church is. But by God’s grace and our understanding of God’s call to us, we seek to live out our call to create a place where all would know that they are a beloved child of God and are welcome here. May it be so here at Good Shepherd.

Welcome Statement: (Which we recited as a responsive Call to Worship)

Welcome to long-time Lutherans, Christians from every tradition, and people new to the faith.

Welcome to all who have no church home, want to follow Jesus, have doubts, or do not believe.

Welcome to new visitors and old friends.

Welcome especially to all who have ever been made to feel unwelcome by the church.

Welcome to people of every age and size, color and culture, marital status, ability and challenge, sexual orientation and gender identity. We want to be clear that we welcome lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender persons to participate in the life of the congregation.

Welcome to believers, questioners, and questioning believers.

**This is a place where you are welcome
to celebrate and grieve, to rejoice and recover.**

**No matter who you are
or where you are on life's journey,
you are welcome here.**

This is a place where lives are made new.

Come and see!