



## *Second Sunday after Epiphany*



14 January 2024

### READINGS

1 Samuel 3:1-10,(11-20); Psalm 139:1-5,12-18; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

### *Sermon by Revd Sharmain James*

Our readings today, in their different ways, explore the idea of being called by God. I want to focus on our Old Testament reading from 1 Samuel.

Many of you remember this story from your own childhood. Samuel became one of the most revered leaders of ancient Israel. He was the last of the judges, those God-inspired figures who ruled the nation as both spiritual and political leaders. He was also considered to be the first of the prophets, courageous visionaries who spoke truth to power and brought the Lord's message to kings who were sometimes reluctant to hear it. Samuel was himself a maker of kings. He personally anointed Israel's first two kings, Saul and David.

But before he was all that, Samuel was just a boy, performing menial tasks as an apprentice to Eli, the high priest. That's what he was doing at the beginning of today's story. Samuel didn't end up there by accident. He got there because his mother, Hannah, had prayed and prayed to the Lord that she might have a son. When Samuel was finally born, Hannah made a vow that her boy would enter the Lord's service. And so, when Samuel reached the proper age — probably about 12 — his mother brought him down to the temple of the Lord at Shiloh and enrolled him in the service of the high priest.

Our story from 1 Samuel 3 begins with a problem — That the word of the Lord was rare in those days. That is the author's way of letting us know things are not going all that well among Israel's religious leadership. It's a time of serious decline.

In the time of Samuel's youth, the worship centres in Israel were failing to draw people. Eli, the priest at the Temple of Shiloh was getting old and feeble, his eyesight was failing, his sons were bringing disgrace to the priestly family by their questionable behavior.

Now it may seem unfair to saddle poor old Eli with the blame for his sons' corruption, but remember what sort of society this is. In Biblical times - family relationships are everything. God calls people not so much as individuals, but as entire family units. If Eli's bloodline has grown immoral - the Lord will look elsewhere, outside his family, to find a faithful new leader. The Lord, as it happens, has already begun this process of changing the leadership of the Temple. The boy Samuel is waiting in the wings, ready to take over spiritual leadership from Eli. He just doesn't know it yet.

In today's passage, the Lord starts speaking to Samuel. The only problem is that Samuel doesn't have the experience yet to know who it is. He doesn't really know God. He's just a boy. He hears that voice calling in the night and naturally assumes it must be Eli. So, Samuel goes and wakes up the old man, saying, "Here I

am, you called me.” “It wasn’t me,” says Eli. “Go back to sleep.” This happens a second time with much the same result. The third time Samuel intrudes on his sleep, Eli realizes there’s more going on than a young boy’s vivid dreams. Eli says, “Pay attention, now. The next time this happens, here’s what you do: Sit up straight and say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’”

The next time the Lord speaks, Samuel is ready and responds, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” This time, the Lord says more than just Samuel’s name. God delivers a message of woe for Eli and his sons. “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.”

Can you imagine how that must have sounded to young Samuel? It’s his very first vision, and it’s a curse. It’s no wonder - when Eli asks him what he has heard, Samuel’s afraid to share it. Eli persists. “Don’t be afraid,” he says. “Just tell me.” Eli already knows what the message is. He knows, deep down, how thoroughly he failed to live as God’s representative.

And so, a faithful little assistant at the temple, the little boy asleep on his bed, Samuel heard God’s call, he heard God tell him that God was about to use him to accomplish the divine work. You and I listen to this story. We treasure this story. As Christians, it is our story, too, yours and mine. And this little story is meant to keep us listening, listening for the call of God upon our lives.

And now, I wonder, could God be calling us? After this story of the call of Samuel, we can never again say things like: “I’m just a layperson,” or “I’m no expert on the Bible.” When tempted to do so, I encourage you to think of Samuel.

Yes, this wonderful story has many implications for our lives.

Firstly, God will probably call us when we least expect it, at the least opportune time, in some unlikely situation.

Second, God may have to call us more than once before God gets our attention. Remember, God had to call Samuel three times before he started listening. God’s voice is rarely anything but direct, but there are so many other voices speaking to us, we usually need our name called a number of times before it finally starts to sink in that God wants our attention.

Thirdly, when God calls, God calls us by our own name, not somebody else’s. And not everybody is called in the same way. In other words, there is no one way to receive God’s call!

Fourthly, no one is too small, too inexperienced, too unimportant to be used by God for big and important work. In fact, judging from the many call stories in the Bible, God appears to take particular delight in calling the “little people” of this world to do big things for God.

Think of the “little people,” the ordinary tax collectors, fishermen, and others whom Jesus called to be his disciples – to mention just a few!

WE TOO have been called . . . by name . . . right where you live . . . to serve God. It is the story of each of us who, through baptism, - - - have said, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”

**AMEN**