

*Here We Are*

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1 Samuel 3:1-20

What a fitting lectionary text for this day. I mean, here we are, on the long-awaited Call Sunday, more than eighteen months after you commissioned a Search Committee to prayerfully discern who God would call to become one of your pastors. And I'm handed a scripture about the prophet Samuel's call story.

So far as call stories go, it's a good one. A classic. In a time when the word of the Lord was rare and visions were scarce, God speaks: clearly and conclusively, addressing Samuel by name. Not that Samuel was sharp enough to figure this out at first. It's a comedy of errors built on the ultimate irony: no one expected God to actually speak, not even in the sacred space of the temple. Finally, with the help of his temple mentor, Samuel comprehends that the voice in the night is the voice of God. He responds with the spare and wise prayer given to him by Eli: *Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.*

This was my prayer, more or less, for the months - or really years - of discernment that led me to this moment. On my good days, anyway. There were times when I couldn't quite make out the contours of my vocation, times when my questions went painfully unanswered. Should I stay at the beloved congregation I've served for more than thirteen years, or should I go? Am I meant to be an associate pastor for the entirety of my career, even though I feel so fully alive in the pulpit?

Do I really want to dive into the sea of administration and impossible expectations that threatens to pull so many senior pastors under? Sometimes my prayers were cries of anxiety and ambivalence. But sometimes, I could pray that Samuel prayer. *Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.*

It would be so easy, then, to make this call sermon about me. The text is practically asking for it. It could be a real crowd-pleaser to put on the mantle of the chosen one. "Here I am, Lord. Here I am, First Congregational United Church of Christ in Appleton, Wisconsin." Only, that would be a really lousy message - flimsy and forgettable. Worse, it would be an unfaithful reading of both text and context.

There's more going on in this story. After all, once Samuel invites God to keep talking, God has quite a bit to say. God is going to do a new thing - a new thing so remarkable it will make the ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.

The next part of the divine message is tricky. Critical context is not included in the lectionary text. God is not exaggerating about the iniquity of Eli's house. Earlier in the book we learn that while Eli's sons should have been approaching their priestly responsibilities with humility and care, they were self-serving scoundrels. Among other sins, they treated the temple like their own private supper club stealing meat that had been offered for ritual sacrifices. Worse, they exploited women who had come to the temple for spiritual nourishment. Up to this point in Israel's history, the leadership of the temple was tied to Eli's bloodline - fathers passing along the sacred honor to sons, generation after generation. No matter that Eli's bloodline had become tainted by dishonor and dysfunction. It was the way they'd always done it. It was the way they assumed they'd always do it. No one expected the voice of God to resound in the darkness and establish an entirely different way of ordering the religious life of Israel. But that's precisely what God is up to with this midnight enterprise.

God is doing away with one priesthood and creating a new one. And despite the fact that this is categorically bad news for Eli and his family, the aging priest helps Samuel recognize and respond to what was happening. He also receives God's judgment without argument. *"It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."*

Now, this is interesting. This is not just a story of an individual hearing his name and accepting his calling. This is a story of people in discernment, collaborating to perceive the voice of God. This is a story of a community of faith accepting an unprecedented, God-guided change to the way it is led.

To be clear, there are many, *many* ways this story does not parallel our story. For one thing, and I want to be very clear about this: I have heard no rumors of priestly transgressions like those committed by the sons of Eli. The edges of the stories don't match up because they shouldn't match up. That's not the way biblical engagement works. But can we see holy echoes? Can we receive divine wisdom? I sure hope so.

When I consider this story in light of our context, it's true: I can't help but see myself in Samuel. Nor can I help but see Pastor Nick in Samuel - after all, he has also received a new and unexpected calling. I have witnessed him respond to that calling with wisdom, humility, and a servant heart, all of which amplified my own sense of call. He is a pastor with whom I would be honored to collaborate in ministry.

I also can't help but see this entire congregation in Samuel. Have you not witnessed that the lamp of God has not yet gone out? Have you not together heard the rumblings of the Holy Spirit, whispering your name? Have you not looked around at one another in astonishment, praying together: *Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening?*

And have you not trusted God's promise, ears tingling and hearts strangely warmed? It's a promise that is repeated in the book of Isaiah, words that I know have become meaningful to you as you consider what comes next for this church. "I am about to do a new thing," God says. "Now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?"

This new thing God is doing does not just require a hearty “Here I am” from one or two folks. This new thing God is doing requires a hearty “here I am” from each and every one of us. This new thing God is doing asks us to speak not only in the first person singular, but in the first person plural: *Here I am, Lord... and here we are.*

Think about it. Tomorrow is the federal holiday honoring the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King is a singularly important figure in the history of the United States of America. It’s hard to imagine what the Civil Rights Movement would have looked like without his influence. He brought a profoundly spiritual grounding to the work of nonviolent resistance. Through his sermons and speeches, he gave the world a moral and spiritual vision that continues to shape justice movements to this day. And - with all due respect to Dr. King - what would his legacy be if he had stood alone? The civil rights movement was a chorus of multiple voices praying for the guidance of the Spirit, a choir of manifold voices saying *Here I am... here we are.*

Our ears will tingle. Maybe they already are. A couple of weeks ago I received a text from Nick out of nowhere: “There is a lot of electricity in the air here!” I give thanks for that electricity, and for whatever it is that will unfold as we step into our shared future. I’m not going to offer any prognostications or prophecies about what that future might be; it’s something we’re going to have to continue discerning in community. But I do know that it will require creativity, courage, and curiosity. I do know that it will contain unforeseen joys and unexpected sorrows, and that we will do the work of bearing these together. And I do know that Christ will be at the center of this community of faith, for he is the head of the church and the high priest of God’s people.

Speaking of Jesus. Perhaps you’ve wondered why he’s seemingly missing from this sermon. Turns out he’s just under the fold. Yes, the text stands on its own as a story of the establishment of a new priesthood. But it’s very intentionally chosen by the

creators of the Lectionary. In the Season of Epiphany, we remember and affirm the new priesthood that is established through Jesus Christ - one in which we are all welcomed into through the waters of baptism.

Never again can we claim that the Word of the Lord is rare. The Word has been made flesh in Jesus. The Word has been made flesh in us - the Body of Christ.

Here we are, Lord. Amen.