

October 17, 2021

I Samuel 3:1-21

We Serve

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One of the things researchers have found to be true about human beings is that having a sense of purpose in our lives not only makes us generally happier, but it also has another pretty significant benefit. In a 2019 study out of the University of Michigan, the research team analyzed data from a 27-year-old Health and Retirement survey and found that participants who found meaning and a sense of purpose (as measured by answers to questions from well-being self-assessments) lived longer than those who'd self-reported little to no sense of purpose and meaning.

Purpose, according to self-help author Scott Mautz, is "...the profound "Why?" Having it creates a sense of mission to do something worthy. It's your significant "yet-to-do" in life. Purpose integrates *who you are* with *what you do*." Mautz was talking specifically about what we do as a vocation, but I believe it extends beyond what we get paid to do and into how we choose to spend our whole lives.

<https://www.inc.com/scott-mautz/a-27-year-study-says-1-thing-is-key-to-happiness-longevity-in-work-life.html>

I don't think it is an accident that finding meaning in what we do with our lives is connected to how much we enjoy life and how long we live. We are not here by accident. We are here on purpose, for a purpose. And I think human beings have known that for a long time. In the ancient stories of the Bible, there are a good number of "call stories," stories about people who were called by God to fulfill a very specific purpose.

One of the most familiar call stories in the biblical narrative is the story of Jesus calling his disciples. A version of this story is in all 3 synoptic gospels. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

***Burning bush slide**

A couple weeks ago, we read Moses's call story when God, from a burning bush, called him to liberate God's people from Egypt. And in today's text, we will read about a young boy named Samuel and his call. One thing the biblical writers seem to want us to learn through these call stories is that God calls unexpected people

and, even when they (we) respond affirmatively, the road is not easy. Before we get to today's story, let's remember where we've been and how we got here.

Last week we read about the Israelites at the beginning of their wilderness journey, learning how to trust God and live in God's ways of abundance which were very different from the ways of scarcity in Pharaoh's Egypt. After forty years of wandering, the generation of Israelites who had been liberated from Egypt died, including Moses. God called a new leader, Joshua, to bring the people into the promised land. After Joshua, the Israelites were guided by a series of judges. Their stories are told in the Book of Judges where a cycle of disobedience emerges in which, in the words of the biblical storytellers, "The people did what was right in their own eyes." It turns out, that's not a good thing because what the people thought was right was very different than what God thought was right. Some of the most horrific acts of violence against women, in the biblical narrative, take place in Judges.

The system of judgeships failed miserably and there were real questions about whether Israel would survive. It is in this in-between time, between a loose system of judges and a unified monarchy, that our story takes place. I Samuel opens with the story of Hannah who was married to Elkanah. Elkanah had 2 wives, Penninah and Hannah, who was his favorite. Hannah was barren, while Penninah had many children and didn't let Hannah forget it. Unlike her ancestors, Sarah, Rachel and Leah, Hannah did not resort to a surrogate to bear her children, she took her broken heart and her prayers to God. She promised God that if she had a son, he would serve God with his whole life. Samuel was God's answer to her prayers and Hannah kept her promise. Though he was still a child, Hannah left him with Eli, the High Priest at the temple. Eli would mentor Samuel. And that is where we pick up today. This is I Samuel 3:1-21.

3 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.

²At 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.”⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”¹¹ 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.¹² On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end.¹³ 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.¹⁴ Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever.”

¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ But Eli called Samuel and said, “Samuel, my son.” He said, “Here I am.”¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ 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.”

¹⁹ As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.²⁰ And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.²¹ The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord.

Samuel’s reaction to his call was very different from Moses’s. While Moses argued with God, suggesting he call someone else, Samuel readily accepted. There was no burning bush. God’s call to Samuel came as a voice in the middle of the night, which Samuel mistook for the voice of Eli. He was a child and, although he lived in the house of the lord, he was inexperienced. If I had to guess, there are plenty of us who miss what God is trying to tell us. Maybe we are busy and don’t slow down long enough to listen. It’s probably also possible that we, like Samuel, are inexperienced. We’ve never been taught to listen or taken time to practice listening for God’s call on our lives. Eli, though, recognized what was happening

and urged Samuel to answer God's call. And he did, "Speak for your servant is listening."

Samuel soon learned that the thing he was being called to would be difficult. I mentioned to the young people this morning that the story of Samuel was one of my favorites when I was a child because someone my age was called by God to do something and that was exciting. What I didn't tell them is, when I heard this story as a young person, I only heard through verse 10 when Samuel said, "Speak your servant is listening." And we learned that God was calling Samuel as a prophet to tell the people the truth about God. And that is true. But that first truth bomb he was told to drop was difficult. To understand how difficult it was, we have to know a little bit more about Eli and when I tell you, you will understand why my childhood Sunday School teachers didn't want to talk much about it.

Eli had two sons, Hophni (hoff-nee) and Phinehas (fuh-nay-us), who, like their father, were priests. In I Samuel 2, the word used to describe them in the New Revised Standard translation is "scoundrels." In the King James, the word is "corrupt." The sons were guilty of two things—they took for themselves sacrificial meat from the people coming to the temple and they used their position and power to have sex with women who were not their wives. And Eli knew about it. He talked to his sons about what they were doing and told them to knock it off. And, of course, they did not. You can imagine, God expected Eli to do more than give his sons a stern talking to.

Later, God sent a man to tell Eli that he had blown it and to expect dire consequences. Quoting God, the man told Eli, "...a time is coming when I will cut off your strength and the strength of your ancestor's family, so that no one in your family will live to old age." The text doesn't say what Eli thought of this message or the messenger. Maybe he thought the guy was a phony. But now, here we are, with Eli and Samuel. Eli knew that it was God calling Samuel and Samuel was definitely not a phony.

God was calling Samuel to say what needed to be said. And his first assignment was to tell Eli, his mentor, the bad news. This was news Eli had already heard from the unnamed man, but now there would be no doubt that this word was from God. The next morning, Eli called for Samuel, knowing God had spoken to

him. And just as Samuel had responded, “Hineni,” the night before when he thought Eli was calling him, again, he said, “Hineni,” here I am. “Here I am,” he said, “Ready to do what I’ve been called to do, just like you’ve taught me.” Samuel had to tell the person that had taken care of him, his mentor, that his family was doomed. And let’s not forget, Samuel was a child. We could learn a lot about courage from this youngster’s story. He was already living into his purpose, becoming the person he was created to be, even though it was hard.

As I mentioned before, having a purpose, a call, in our lives is good. It is part of what makes us whole. But this story reminds us that answering our call is not always easy. I have heard people talk about being certain of what God was calling them to do because it just seemed like all the doors were opening and it was so easy. That has not been my experience of God’s call. Maybe it’s just me, but I don’t have to be called to do the easy stuff. I can usually manage those things. When I sense God is calling me, it’s usually for something that seems hard and very often scares me. I know some of you can relate. It is the work of saying what needs to be said, even when it is what people don’t want to hear. It is the work of standing with the ones who have been pushed into the shadows when, quite honestly, people would rather “those people” stay in the shadows alone. It is the work of sitting with people who are suffering, even when it feels like it will rip my heart out. It is work that is often inconvenient, isolating, and just plain scary.

You may be wondering, “What am I called to?” The good news is, each one of us is called to the same thing: bringing wholeness to a fragmented world. We are called to work to bring about the world God dreams about. We should all do that in our own ways, in ways that make us feel closer to who we sense we were created to be. And I think this work should also bring us joy, but we should remember that joy is different than happiness. Joy is that deep down in your gut feeling that tells you when you did the right thing. And coincidentally, for me, when I have done the right thing and it wasn’t easy, I feel a deep sense of joy. And if I’m truthful, that is how I want to feel. The quest for that feeling is what gets me in the pulpit on Sundays. And then when I step into this pulpit, I remember that this is not about me (although much of what I say needs to be heard by me), this is about us and our shared ministry. I am not alone.

You inspire me all the time. I have watched and learned from those of you who have been doing this work longer than I have been alive. Through you, I have

learned what sacrificial service looks like. I have learned that, in so many ways, the author of Ecclesiastes is right, "There is nothing new under the sun." I love this church because together, piece by piece, we are repairing a broken world. With your presence and your resources, you support the work we do together, loudly proclaiming that All Means All in the kin-dom of God, serving food to people who are food insecure, finding solutions for the ones who are experiencing homelessness, making sure the senior citizens in our community have the help they need, insisting on justice and leaning into compassion. Even when the work is hard, We Serve. And it matters because the purpose of this church is the same as our purpose as individuals: bringing wholeness to a fragmented world.

I hope this sermon has given you a chance to reflect on what God is calling you to do. What little part (or big part) of the world are you being called to repair by using your unique gifts and your passion? I will end this morning with an image that has been helpful to me as I have reflected on this work we are called to. It is the image of a shattered piece of pottery that has been put back together using the Japanese art of kintsugi. Kintsugi is a way of repairing pottery with gold. The art reinforces the idea that it is possible for what has been repaired to be stronger and more beautiful than it was even before it was broken. The work we do as individuals, to put this broken world back together, will, in the end, make the world more beautiful than we can imagine. And I think this beauty comes because, even though we are each using our own individual gifts, sometimes working independently, we are bringing about wholeness together. We are better together. I love this church. I love it because we are called to serve and have responded: Here we are. Amen.