

Second Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/B): "Speak, Lord, Your Servant Is Listening"
1 Samuel 3:1-10, Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18, John 1:43-51
January 13-14, 2024
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

How many of you have seen "Raiders of the Lost Ark," the first of the Indiana Jones movies? Whether or not you've seen it, do you know to what ark they're referring? (Hint: it's not Noah's ark!) **The Ark of the Covenant** is what they're searching for in the movie. It really existed, and there are descriptions of it in the Bible. It was indeed like a treasure chest, including the 2 stone tablets with the Ten Commandments, a bit of manna from the wilderness journey, and Aaron's staff, the one that became a snake when he threw it on the ground before Pharaoh. The Ark was a chest that looked like a seat, flanked by angels. The Israelites believed that it was God's throne, and that the invisible God sat there. (Sometimes the Ark was carried into battle, a visible sign of "God with us!" Once the Philistines captured it, but the Israelites got it back again.) To be physically close to the Ark was to be very near to God, Godself.

Our first lesson this weekend is about the call of young Samuel, the son of once-childless Hannah who so rejoiced in God's gift to her that she gave her son to serve in God's sanctuary. Samuel was an acolyte, a helper to the priest Eli who was responsible for the Tabernacle, the tent in which the Ark of the Covenant lived. (This story takes place before 1,000 B.C., so the first Temple from Solomon's reign wasn't even built yet.) This is how the scene is set for us:

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. [But just wait!]

*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 [meaning it was still nighttime], and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, **where the ark of God was.** (1 Samuel 3)*

In the midst of the silence Samuel hears his name, and assumes the only other person in the tent has summoned him. "Here I am!" He goes to Eli and announces, "Here I am, for you called me." (1

Sam. 3:4c, 5b) Eli says, “No, back to bed!” Sleepy Samuel obeys, but hears his name again and trots back to Eli: *“Here I am, for you called me.”* (1 Sam. 3:6c) “No, I didn’t. Back where you came from.” A **third** time the child hears, “Samuel!” He may have wondered what the old guy was up to, he may have been afraid he’d be yelled at for waking the priest a third time, but the boy pads back to his supervisor’s sleeping mat and tries again: *“Here I am, for you called me.”* (1 Sam. 3:8c)

We’ve already heard that Eli’s eyesight was dim, but his hearing was pretty good. And he still had the capacity for insight. So the third time was the charm for him to realize that God was involved in these midnight wake-up calls. Instead of grumpily asking Samuel, “What’s your problem, kid?” he advised him to say **this** if he heard his name again: *“Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”* (1 Sam. 3:9c)

That verse is a mantra to hold close to our hearts, to cut out and tape to the bathroom mirror, or affix with a magnet to the refrigerator door, or clip to the visor in your car. *“Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”* And what better **place** to pray that prayer than here, in this sanctuary, God’s house? It’s not a tent, it’s not a temple, but it’s a truly holy place, where the Word is proclaimed, the Sacraments are celebrated and the faithful gather, space seasoned with 175 years of prayers uttered by those who have come before us. After we receive our Lord in Holy Communion today, what better **time** to kneel at the rail or in the pew afterwards, and expectantly whisper the invitation, *“Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening”* ?

The Lord is calling each one of us as surely as the Lord was calling the child Samuel in the first lesson, and as surely as Jesus calls Philip in today’s Gospel. St. John writes, *“[Jesus] found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’”* (John 1:43b) We know Philip was searching **before** Jesus found him, because Philip says to Nathanael, *“We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”* (John 1:45b) Nathanael’s response is,

*“Nazareth? You’ve got to be kidding.” But Philip said, “Come, see for yourself.”
(John 1:46, The Message)*

Ultimately we **all** have to “see for ourselves.” It was true for young Samuel. We’re told that before he heard the LORD call his name,

“... Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.” (1 Sam. 3:7)

He needed Eli’s help to know the Source of his literal call. Yet Eli was no perfect guy. The part of the story that follows today’s lesson is grim news; Eli had closed his eyes to the corruption of his sons’ priestly service, and their entire line is going to be blotted out. But Eli **still** has a role to play in the call of one of the greatest prophets in Hebrew Scripture. Samuel grows up to be the man who will anoint the shepherd boy David as God’s choice for the next king of Israel, and he’ll be the one to break the news to Saul that his reign as king is over and his favor with God is past.

Eli reveals God’s call to Samuel, Philip leads Nathanael to Jesus. God chooses to use **us**, imperfect as we are, as messengers, agents of the Divine, spokespersons for the Holy, bearers of the Gospel, proclaimers of the Living Word. I came across this quote which fits really well: “One lighted torch serves to light another.”¹ Those of us who worship at the Easter Vigil or on Christmas Eve at 9 p.m. share the candle flame with each other. “One lighted torch serves to light another.” The Holy Spirit “calls, gathers and enlightens” each of us to share the light of Christ with others. The adults here need to pass on our faith to our youth and children, grandchildren, students whom we teach, Scouts whom we mentor, players whom we coach, employees whom we supervise, neighbors, family members and friends whom we love, that they may *“know the Lord, and the word of the Lord... [will be] revealed to them.”* I have heard God’s call to do that as a pastor, a minister of Word & Sacrament. Ned has heard God’s call to do that as a deacon, a minister of Word & Service.

I may not have prayed the exact words, *“Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening,”* but I certainly prayed hard about whether to enter the candidacy process, moving toward ordination. Growing up I had no female role models preaching the sermon or presiding at Eucharist. At one point I decided, “God couldn’t possibly be calling me to be a Lutheran pastor, because I can’t sing,” and all the Lutheran pastors I knew chanted beautifully! I consulted with my Lutheran parish pastor, though, the man who became my ordination sponsor, and he gave me 3 questions to ask:

- 1) Would I be “following my bliss,” finding joy in the career I was considering?
- 2) Did the community affirm I had the gifts needed to perform ministry?
- 3) Was there an actual opportunity for me to minister?

The Holy Spirit helped me discern the answers: “Yes.” “Yes.” “Yes.” So I proceeded, to be honest, with trepidation. The good people of St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Mundelein, IL, extended me a call. I was ordained there, 31 years ago. Now I can say, “Amen! It was a good decision, and one that the Lord has affirmed along the Way.”

Ned has heard God’s call to a ministry of Word and Service as a deacon in the Church. He was already serving in worship and music ministry, in youth and family ministry, but God’s call was to deepen his knowledge, broaden his experience, ask the larger Church’s blessing on his call to serve. What he does already he will continue to do; what Peter and I do we will continue to do. As we vote at the annual meeting on extending a call for Ned to be ordained as a deacon, we are honoring his call from God, and the affirmation of our NJ Synod and our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America of his giftedness for the fruitful ministry he performs among us. As you weigh your decision, please remember to pray, *“Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”* Amen

¹William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, Vol. I (rev. ed., Daily Study Bible Series, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) p. 91.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

