

Second Sunday after Epiphany, January 17, 2021

1 Samuel 3:1-10(11-20), 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, John 1:43-51, Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17

In coming up with sermon ideas, the first struggle is to understand the Scripture texts in and of themselves. That isn't always easy as some of these stories were written thousands of years ago. Add to that they were usually written in Hebrew or Greek and not in modern Hebrew or Greek, but the ancient forms of those languages. Sometimes the meaning of words change, like "gay" used to mean happy now it means "having impeccable taste and good style"! When St. Paul says "Twice I was stoned" it can mean something quite different today.

Then there's the second challenge of sermon writing, how to relate that story to the circumstances of our modern life. Here, we don't focus so much on the subtle nuances implied by particular verbs or nouns, but on the Big Picture message the stories have to teach us.

In the 1st lesson this morning, the story of how a young altar boy name Samuel became a great Prophet, there are some little clues hidden in the grammar of the text that help us understand the bigger overarching themes. For instance, in "Bible Code" saying a name once means Judgement – like your mother shouting "Shane, get down here right now!" A name spoken once usually means trouble. But a name spoken twice means love. Keep that in mind in a few minutes when you hear how God will keep calling little altar boy "Samuel, Samuel". It makes a big difference in how you'll interpret the story.

But, tempting as it is to get lost in the little literary devices like that, our bigger goal is to relate these stories to our modern lives, to use these scripture passages, not as museum pieces of curiosity, but as ways and tools to understanding much larger, big-pictures insights to the things going on in our world right now.

I must admit to all of you that I would have voted for anybody other than the orange king Herod in our last election. I'm not normally a very political person, but the cruelty and immorality of an egotistical depot made me get off the fence a bit.

Even then, I often found myself thinking "Really? Is a 78-year-old man the best we can come up with? The poor old thing deserves a comfortable retirement". I'm now old enough to have watched 11 presidents and I've noticed how they all start looking somewhat youthful and they all end looking so tired and worn down by the weight of that responsibility. I dread to think what 78 year old President Biden will look like at 82 let along 86.

But this is where these scripture readings give us some very important big picture insights that relate perfectly to our present situations. There's a great big pattern across the whole Bible of God picking either weak children or very feeble old people to carry out God's work. It's a weird insight and it's a strange policy on God's part.

I think of King David, the young shepherd boy the great prophet Samuel picked to be king over all his strong strapping brothers or Joseph the youngest of the tribes of Israel or Jesus the infant king in a manger. All in times of transition. At the other end of the spectrum:

Moses, 120 years old. Abraham and Sarah in their 90's when they got pregnant with Isaac, or Elizabeth in her 70's when she had John the Baptist.

Trust me, both lists go on and on to a strange Big Picture. It's as if God wants us to be clear that these great people weren't acting alone, but achieved incredible things not on their own because they were too young or too old or too broken to do it without God's help. I also see another big pattern, that God sees strength and power in the cast-offs, the marginalized and the broken. Flawed heroes. Here we also think of Dr. MLK.

So, this morning as we listen to the story of little Samuel serving a blind old priest, Eli, in the temple or we hear about St. Paul working out what it means that our bodies are in a temple or cathedral housing God - or the calling of Nathaniel/Bartholomew perhaps a mentally disabled man to be a great apostle, we should keep in mind that all of them were weak, flawed, too young or too old for the job God called them to. Yet with God's help, they all did Great and unimaginable things in the Big Picture.

When I hear these stories, suddenly I look at Grandpa Joe and think "This is going to be amazing" because I see God at work again.

I see an old man who stutters and goes to Mass regularly, and I remember old Moses was a murderer and suffered from a terrible stutter and look at what God helped him do. The human way doesn't always work out well for us. We pick the strong, the mighty, the billionaires, the CEOs and it all falls apart into a culture of violence. Once again, we think of the Rev. MLK.

God picks the crippled, the Roosevelts, the Moses, the children like St. Mary or King David, a boy fighting a giant or this morning the 12-year-old Samuel and achieves greatness, a culture of love not violence.

In the big picture, it seems to make no sense. God's choices seem so wrong, they seem destined for failure. Yet, as the old blind priest, Eli, will say in our next reading: "It is God. Let him do what seems good to him".

And let us, like Samuel, like David, like St. Paul, like Nathanael, and so many others, trust God's weird decisions and simply say: "Yes, Lord, Here I am."

If it feels like God just picked the most unlikely candidate in the midst of countless nightmares and threats and disasters, then I say "Wonderful! God is obviously about to do something incredible!"

Let us now listen for that "still, small voice of calm" which calls us all to amazing things we could have never imagined: God is in the House!