

"GO AND LOOK"

1 Samuel 3:1-10, John 1:43-51

(01-17-21)

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Samuel was a young boy, probably around 12 or 13 years of age, serving in the temple of the Lord at Shiloh under the tutelage of the old priest Eli. It was great to hear Roy read our first scripture reading today because I wanted someone who might have been close to Samuel's age to read that passage. I think Roy did a great job, thank you! Now Samuel's mother Hannah had prayed for a child and God granted her prayer. When her son Samuel was weaned, she took him to the temple at Shiloh and presented him to Eli to be raised in the service of the Lord, for that's what she promised God in her prayers. So Samuel lived with Eli and his sons, Hophni and Phineas, who were wicked and abused their position as servants of the Lord. In those days, the word of the Lord was rare and visions were not widespread, says our text. But God was about to do a new thing and God was going to do it through this young boy Samuel.

But first things first. When the word of the Lord is rare and visions not frequent, how does one recognize the voice of God? Remember, Samuel had lived almost all of his life in the temple. He would have attended to the work given to him by Eli. He might have helped with the preparation for the sacrifices that the priests did for the atonement of the peoples' sins. Maybe he was assigned temple clean up duties. In all likelihood Samuel grew up becoming very accustomed to the rituals of the temple. He would have known all the language and all the practices of that place where people came to connect with God in the most formal of ways. At Shiloh was the Tent of Meeting, where Joshua had divvied up the land of Canaan for the tribes of Israel and the Tabernacle, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. So Samuel lived and slept as close to the presence of God as anyone in all of Israel, but when God's voice called to Samuel, **he did not recognize it.**

The text says that Samuel didn't yet know the Lord and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. **Its instructive to read that someone so familiar with the language of the sacred could not identify the voice of the Sacred One,** that someone who spent so much time amidst the trappings of the divine presence could not recognize that presence when God chose to speak. **I wonder if that's the same for us?** We who are so familiar with the language of God, we who gather so regularly for the worship of God, even if now it's online, we who are so used to all the trappings of the divine presence, **when God does speak in our midst, when God's voice calls out, do we recognize it,** especially if that voice may be saying something we aren't prepared to hear?

Samuel ran to Eli the first time he heard the voice. But Eli said, I didn't call for you, go back to sleep. And twice more Samuel heard the voice and ran to Eli. But Eli did not call for Samuel.

The third time Samuel came to Eli, the old priest began to understand. And he instructed Samuel to answer God, to say, speak, for your servant is listening. And God spoke to Samuel, God spoke a new thing, something that no one in Israel would have expected. But God called Samuel **four** times before Samuel was finally able to understand who it was that was calling him.

How many times has God called us and we've chalked up that voice to originating somewhere else? How often do we attribute God's voice in our lives to another source, either out of ignorance or out of a desire to ignore? **Do we hear God's voice only when it seems to agree with what we already believe?** Are we so ingrained in our traditions and patterns of worship and discipleship that a different voice wouldn't register authentically as God's? **How do we break out of the danger of a preconditioned response and move to a posture of openness and possibility for a new word from God?**

The gospel of John is different from Matthew, Mark and Luke, called the synoptic gospels. In John, there is no wilderness temptation story of Jesus. Jesus is baptized and immediately begins to gather disciples around him. Just prior to the text from John's gospel which was read this morning, Jesus, in response to a question about where he was staying from two of John the Baptist's disciples, including Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, both of whom would become disciples of Jesus, replied, come and see. And the next day Jesus went to Galilee and he found Philip and said to him, **follow me.**

Philip does, and he discovers that Jesus is the one of whom Moses and the prophets spoke, the messiah. And Philip goes and finds his friend Nathaniel and tells him about Jesus. Before we move on too quickly, I want to reiterate something that most of us already know. When people are asked how they came to a church for the first time, most people, 80% is the number which is most often quoted, say they came to church for the first time **because someone asked them**, someone **invited** them, just like Philip invited his friend Nathaniel to come and see Jesus. Now I know that in the midst of this pandemic, inviting people to church has to be understood in a different context. But I think of all the possibilities of this new context. Some of you, I know, are a bit shy or maybe even fearful of asking anyone to come to church with you. But what about just inviting them to watch a YouTube video or sharing a link on Facebook? Maybe that's not as hard as actually asking someone to come to church with you. Maybe this is an opportunity to start inviting people to church in a baby steps kind of way.

I think there's a couple of other things to keep in mind about this. First, if we were to ask someone to come to church with us, to come to RPC, to come and see, or even just invite them to watch one of our worship videos, **what would it be about RPC that we would want our friend to see?** You know, ultimately it can't be a program or an event, or even worship that would be the focus of our invitation to come and see, it can't be the preacher, the choir,

the praise band, the building. If we invite people to come and see, **its to see Jesus**, to see how Jesus is made manifest in how this congregation worships, in how this congregation serves, in how we live out what it means to be followers of Jesus.

And the other thing that we need to keep in mind is that no matter how wonderfully we as a congregation might live out our faith, if **you** are the one inviting, then those whom you invite will be looking at **you** most closely. If you can say, come and see, they will be looking at **you** to see how Jesus is made manifest in **your** life. If you send a link to the worship service, they're going to be wondering whether what they see and hear in the services is being reflected in your life, in how you live and serve. **So, how is that going for you?** How is it for you when it comes to hearing the voice of God? Are you open to newness, or are you more like how Nathaniel was when Philip first came to him and told him about Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth? Nazareth? Really? Seriously? Can anything good come out of Nazareth? **It's a preconditioned response.** Everyone knows that Nazareth's just a poor little excuse for a town. Nothing good ever comes out of Nazareth. There is no posture of openness or possibility in Nathaniel in what he says. But interestingly, what he says and what he does are two different things. There's obviously something about **Philip**, something about **his** integrity, **his** credibility, that when he says to Nathaniel, come and see, Nathaniel agrees to go and look. **And when he meets Jesus, nothing is ever the same again.**

Back to Samuel. He's just a young boy, an apprentice. Eli's the priest. He's of the line of Aaron, brother of Moses. If anyone should have heard the voice of God, shouldn't it have been Eli? If anyone should hear the voice of God, shouldn't it be us, the church, the established, the familiar? But God speaks to Samuel. It's unexpected, Eli's not prepared. It takes him three times before he figures it out. But he does and he says to Samuel the next morning, tell me what the Lord said to you. Don't hide anything from me. You've got to hand it to Eli, at least on this. He knew that the Lord had spoken to Samuel. He knew that was different. Why didn't the Lord speak to him, that's what usually happened, right? Eli could have ignored Samuel. He's just a kid! What could God possibly have to say to this young boy, this novice, this inexperienced, untrained kid? But Eli wanted to hear it all, even if it meant the end to all that he had held dear.

I'm not saying we are Eli's. **But I wonder if there is a chance that even in the church, God is speaking through the unexpected.** I wonder whether God isn't speaking to those among us who aren't so bound up in tradition or routine or familiarity, who haven't become so accustomed to a particular way of things, **whose posture is still supple enough** to be more consistently open to possibility and newness. Maybe it's our youth, our children, but do we ever ask them what they think? Maybe it's those who haven't been raised in the church since birth, maybe it's those whose voices are most quiet in our midst.

And what about in the midst of this pandemic, **who might God be speaking through today?**

Could it be that God is speaking to those who have little or no voice, maybe the elderly, the weak, the ones who can't speak for themselves? Do you think that how we have begun to see the vulnerability and the needs of those most at risk in this pandemic may be a way of God speaking to us through them? Is it God's way of reminding us to be more attentive to the needs of people who we have taken for granted or overlooked in the past? Is it God's way of reinforcing in us how much our lives and our faith has been built on the shoulders of those who have come before us and how much we owe to them and how that responsibility should be expressed in our attentiveness and care? **How are we hearing what God might be saying to and through them?** The question is, will we be like Eli and ask them what they may be hearing from God? Or will we ignore them, after all children don't have the experience, the discernment, the understanding that we would. And the weak, old and fragile, well, their time is past, why would God be using them to communicate to us rather than vital, able, strong people? But are we so sure of what we want to hear that we wouldn't dare take the chance that God might be speaking something new in unexpected ways through unlikely people? **And isn't this where newness comes from?**

Come and see, says Jesus. Come and see, says Philip to his friend Nathaniel. Come and see, says the God who speaks of newness to the unexpected. **You know what the good news is in all this? God is the initiator.** God calls Samuel and Jesus finds Philip. Philip doesn't find Jesus, it's the other way around. Before Philip invites Nathaniel, Jesus has already invited Philip. The good news is that the God who knows us intimately, the God who knit us together in our mother's wombs, the God who has searched us and knows us completely, **loves us and will call us, again and again and again and again, until we will learn how to listen, until we begin to learn to whom God is speaking and how to hear what God is saying, to them and to us.** God will call us, again and again, never giving up on us, inviting us to come and see, come and see, until we adopt the posture of possibility and finally go and look. And when we do, may we never be the same again.

Thanks be to God, Amen.