“Future Wisdom, Trustworthy Calling”

1 Samuel 3:1-20 John 1:43-51

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First Presbyterian Church, Sandpoint, Idaho

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That’s an amazing story! Which one? Both! The story of Jesus with Philip and Nathanael, and the story of the prophet, Samuel, with Eli. They are both filled with dynamic Wisdom and layers of meaning that bend as they resonate throughout time.

The story in 1 Samuel has amazing “book ends.” The verses that start it, along with the dynamics of the verses that end it, have qualitative descriptions of what’s going on as we see the passing of the torch from Eli to Samuel. Verse 1 says, “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.” Notice Samuel is a boy, which introduces a feeling of being small, vulnerable, dependent, and powerless. Samuel was ministering to the LORD, but even that was “under Eli.” Eli is fading, the light level diminishing. Eli, God’s prophet, is lying down. The context is nightfall and even the LORD seems reduced to a lamp, a lamp that had not yet gone out. When the LORD calls, it’s to Samuel, the boy, who still operates in the context of ministering under Eli, running to him to answer the voice’s call. There’s drama and confusion.

By the end of this story, notice it’s now daytime, and darkness is dispelled. In the day, things are made visible, Samuel shares everything the LORD had said about Eli and his family. Samuel is not referred to as a boy, but is growing up. As the end of this passage, Samuel is no longer ministering to the LORD under Eli, he’s growing up, and the LORD is with him. It’s the LORD who doesn’t let Samuel’s words fall to the ground, and through this relationship, “all Israel” knows that Samuel is a trustworthy prophet, of the LORD. No longer “to” the LORD, but “of” the LORD. This is a big shift.

All the middle part, the back and forth as Samuel goes to Eli, and Eli sends him back, the instructions once they clue in that the LORD is calling; all this focuses our attention not on Eli, or even Samuel, but on the action and activity of God. It is the LORD who calls, the LORD giving direction, the LORD making promises, and the LORD who shares how things are going to go with the house of Eli and Israel. All this comes at a major phase of transition for Israel, from a time of judges to a time of kings. The prophet, Samuel, is the embodiment of God’s guidance through the dramatic changes.

Part of the confusing nature of this passage comes because the focus is off. Only after the focus returns to the LORD; then, the correct stance of being open, a servant of God, a conduit for rightful action, then this story and the larger movement of history and religion unite and settle into proper alignment. God is revealed, not as distant, not as dimming, not even as harsh or condemning; God is trustworthy, faithful, and drawing people into the light of revelation.

John’s Gospel is similar, starting out with the high Christology of the Incarnation as God’s light creates and gives focus to the world. John’s Gospel is structured around Jesus; sharing words, showing signs, inviting people to follow, teaching them to open themselves to God’s faithfulness. Yet these words and works of God are met with resistance and even rejection. Like chapter 1 verses 10 and 11 frame it, saying, “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.”

But John’s Gospel also shares that there are some who do accept Christ as revealed, unveiled, manifest, and are able to perceive the essential nature of Christ. In verse 14, we hear of the Incarnation: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

Today’s passage is a reflection of all of this: revelation, revealing the essential nature of Jesus, the Christ; calling, the inviting, empowering, and sharing in relationship with God, experiencing the fullness of grace and truth in Christ. Today’s passage also shows resistance, recorded as Nathanael asks, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth.” Then again, most call stories have some form of resistance, and doubt isn’t the negation of faith, and sometimes the essential ingredient in the deepening of faith. These verses are a microcosm of the larger, biblical story and the dynamics of discipleship, including sharing promises of future glory.

Not only are these stories of Samuel and the early disciples pointing us to God’s faithful action and activity, but they also play with a sense of time. Playing with a sense of time, we see 1 Samuel starting with the rarity of God’s word; we end with consistency of God’s word, as Samuel shares with the LORD, no words fall to the ground. In some ways, this sounds linear, like a progression. But in other ways, this has nothing to do with time at all, except in the sense of revelation and calling, human perception opening to God’s eternity, which is beyond time and inclusive of generations.

In John, we start out reading, “The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee.” This passage ends with Jesus saying, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened…” as he shares a future vision. Again, this comes across as a linear progression: Jesus does this, then this, then this. From calling Philip to angels ascending and descending; perception grows, vision expands, and the glory of God in Christ becomes more and more developed, declared, and experienced. But this is more than linear, it’s an unveiling, a sharing within time of that which is beyond time. It’s also broadening, as the “you” in that last verse is second person plural, meaning it includes Nathanael, the reader, and us. Through the biblical story and life’s ongoing witness, God is active, trustworthy, and calling, through Christ, to a living faith. “The Word becomes flesh” is both a specific event in Jesus, and, a statement of reality shaped by the embodiment of God’s grace throughout the ages.

In a video interview, Cynthia Bourgeault shares about spiritually opening ourselves to connection with God’s larger Realm. Developing a larger capacity to perceive God’s Presence and connect with Christ’s Consciousness in Integral ways, she makes an observation that seems compelling and gives another perspective to view this morning’s scripture stories as God speaks to Samuel and Christ converses with Nathanael who was seen under the fig tree.

Cynthia Bourgeault talks about God’s Wisdom, [[link to a Vimeo video](https://vimeo.com/493923629), the reference comes from 2:55-7:12 on timer] and how we typically assign assumptions to how this Wisdom works, or where it comes from. We look at Jesus and assume God’s Wisdom is in Jesus, or some other aspect of the past in a linear way. But she bends this understanding, reminding us that Wisdom’s way of knowing and mystical understanding is eternal, perennially expressed, and outside of time, interacts with time, not from the past, but if anything, from the future. She says, “Wisdom flows to us from the future.… It’s always coming to us with the same Wisdom, from that same wellspring. We call it the future, because it hasn’t downloaded in time yet. It’s really the center from which it suffuses out.” She talks about spiritual disciplines, faithfulness that does come “…up to us through time, from Jesus, from the Desert Fathers and Mothers, through the Rule of St. Benedict, through the wonderful practices… all this has been preparing us to receive what’s coming, so we can actually comprehend it.” (“Advent Coming Toward Us: A Conversation on Gebser, C. Bourgeault & Marcella Kraybill-Greggo” from Bob Sabath on Vimeo)

In that sense, the biblical narrative extends into our own time, and our place within humanity and the larger creation continue to interact and engage with the LORD, the Wisdom of God that is above all, in all, and through all, the Living Christ who draws all things. We are invited, like Samuel, like Philip and Nathanael, to grow up, like Jesus, in Wisdom and in stature, to prepare our soul for an open perception to see heaven opened and divine activity at work.

We live in an exciting time of promise. The old storylines cannot contain what’s coming. God’s Spirit is bursting onto the scene, persistently calling us by name to pay attention, to wake up, to become increasingly aware through our hearts, souls, and renewed minds to what God is doing in our midst, calling through Wisdom from and toward future fulfilment which we can welcome even now.

Thanks be to God for the Season of Epiphany revealing the essential nature of God’s Wisdom calling us from the future as we take our place in the circle of trustworthy servants welcoming the faithfulness of God. We are invited to “come and see” through the eyes of our hearts.

May God’s humble, vulnerable love, revealed in Christ, continue to lead us, fill us, and use us to the glory of God, NOW, even as forever. Amen.