

## **SO, WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU GROW UP?**

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1 Samuel 3:1-20; Ephesians 4:1-7; 11-16

“So, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

I can still recall the sunny spring lunch recess in 5<sup>th</sup> grade at Hillside Elementary School when my classmates and I discussed that very question. As clear as if it was yesterday, I remember my answer – I told my friends with great confidence and seriousness that I was either going to be a teacher... or a nun. I could tell from the ensuing laughter that the nun part didn't sit too well with my classmates, and for the rest of my elementary school years every cartoon, limerick or joke about nuns was shared in my presence with great relish.

As we grew, the question would be asked again and again in different forms by family, friends, school counselors and society in general:

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

“What do you want to major in?”

“What are our plans after college?”

“What are you going to do with your life?”

Now, Samuel, the young 12 year old hero of our Old Testament story this morning, was probably never asked that question. Some years before, his mother Hannah had brought him to the temple at Shiloh in fulfillment of a promise she had made to God before the boy was even born. As a woman who had been unable to have children, she promised God that if she were granted that privilege, she would return the child to divine service. Hannah was a woman of her word – Samuel was born, and as soon as he was able to make it on his own, she brought him to Eli to serve as apprentice to the old high priest. With a decent place to live, enough food to eat, and a career future already started and mapped out for him, there didn't seem to be any reason for Samuel – or anyone else – to even question his future.

But, as usually happens in these stories, God has a whole different set of plans for our young hero.

It was not the best of times for the people of Israel, but not yet the worst either. The nation was still a loose confederation of tribes. The wilderness lessons were over, and the people had settled into the land God long ago promised to Abraham. After Joshua, the Israelites were led by a series of Judges who rise up in difficult times. As the book of Judges comes to a close, tribal wars threaten to tear the people apart. They're finding the Promised Land is not easy and without conflict. The once vibrant and dynamic faith that had carried the people from slavery and exile from Egypt, through the wilderness and finally settlement in a promised homeland was now reduced to a mostly mundane, religious routine, and for some, even an opportunity for corruption. While Eli stood on the sidelines in the temple wringing his hands, shaking his head and lamely telling his two sons to stop their misbehavin', the two sons – Hophni and Phineas – temple priests themselves – blithely steal the people's offerings and force themselves on some of the lovelier young women who came to worship. A man of God warns Eli of God's displeasure and the price Eli would have to pay for refusing to discipline his sons. But still, Eli takes no action against the injustices. So God does.

Young Samuel is asleep in the sanctuary, in his position near the Ark of the Covenant. A voice wakes him: “Samuel! Samuel!” The boy thinks it's Eli calling – he doesn't see anyone else around.

So he goes to the old man and says, “Here I am... you called me?” But Eli groggily rolls over and says, “No I didn’t. Go back to sleep.”

So Samuel goes back to bed, but again the call comes to him, “Samuel!” Possibly a bit perplexed, the boy goes back to Eli and says, “Here I am, for you called me.” And again, Eli says, “I did not call you; go back to bed.” A third time this all happens, and finally it dawns on Eli that the boy is truly being called, and not by just anyone, but by God. This time Eli tells the boy to go back, listen, and then answer God. So Samuel does just that – this time, Samuel acknowledges God and says, “Speak; your servant is listening”. And then he receives the word of the Lord.

The word of the Lord was not good news, at least not for the status quo. It was not an easy experience or a gentle word that Samuel heard. God had plans that would stun the people of Israel and devastate Eli. In answering the call from God and listening to and delivering God’s word, young Samuel was set apart for a powerful ministry that would have far-reaching consequences for Eli, his sons and the people of Israel. Suddenly, 12 year old Samuel was not going to be what he or anyone else thought he was going to be when he grew up.

He was called by God by name. He listened and answered. And God transformed him from lowly 12 year old apprentice to become the prophetic voice to a nation. Samuel was the first in the line of prophetic voices, where the Spirit and Word of God came and lived in a person in a powerful way. A prophet spoke a Word from the Lord with boldness, strength and conviction. Samuel was followed by Elijah and Elisha, by Isaiah and Jeremiah, by Hosea and Amos, by Daniel and Ezekiel, all of whom had the courage to speak God’s word honestly and forthrightly to everyone, including the kings over them. We get to the New Testament, and the line of prophets continues with John the Baptist. Then comes Pentecost, and the Spirit of God comes down on all Christians, who are called to speak boldly, powerfully and personally about Jesus Christ. That whole cycle of prophecy begins for the first time with young 12 year old Samuel, who listened, answered and served God.

What is most amazing about this story from scripture is that it didn’t just happen once upon a time a few thousand years ago. This story happens tens of thousands of times a day, every day in this world. It’s your story. It’s my story. It’s the story of this faith community. Names, genders and jobs may be different, but we are all Samuels at the core.

Each of us has been called by name, by God. But I think for many of us, we’re pretty much like young Samuel and it takes a few tries on God’s part to get our attention. We may have been too young and immature to recognize God’s first call to us. In our Reformed tradition, we believe God first calls us, first lays a claim on our lives in the sacrament of baptism. In this congregation, young people just a tad older than Samuel are invited to confirm the promises made on their behalf in baptism. It is their opportunity to say, “Yes. I know God has called me by name. I know God chose me long ago. Today, I choose God back. Speak Lord; your servant is listening.” Just like Samuel, they have been apprentices in this household of faith. In confirmation and commissioning, God transforms them through the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit for who knows what potentially incredible ministry. Perhaps we need to change our habit of asking young folks, “So, what do you want to be when you grow up?” Instead, we should be asking, “What is God calling you to be when you grow up?”

What difference would it make to you or I if we are asked that question today? What is God calling you and me to be when we grow up? Chronologically, you might look around and think, “um, we’re mostly all adults in this space, we are grown up!” Chronologically yes, sitting here today we are a group mostly in the second half of life. But chronological age and spiritual maturity are two different things, as we heard in Ephesians a little while ago. Spiritually, we’re never fully done growing up into our faith maturity, no matter our chronological age. In our second reading this morning from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, we hear the words that we are each called by God, “for building up of the body

of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. " As individuals and as a community of faith, we are called to grow up together into the likeness of Christ. We are called as children of faith to be the continuing prophetic voice of Samuel, speaking and bearing witness to Christ's vision of the Kingdom of God.

As I was pondering and reflecting on Samuel's story it occurred to me that this congregation, while we pride ourselves on being around for so long and being so very "old", is actually a young whippersnapper in the full scope of the history of Christianity. Our 357 years of existence compared to the approximately 2000+ years of Christianity would make us roughly a 13 year old – just a little older than young Samuel. This faith community has been apprenticed to the faith all our years; we too have been dedicated for the serving of God. We know the world is not as it should be; we know the Kingdom is breaking in but there is also complacency and injustice, indifference and corruption, just as there was in Samuel's time. What is God's message and call to this congregation, for such a time as this? What prophetic word is God calling this community to share with the world? How can we clearly hear and respond to God's call to Setauket Presbyterian Church?

I do wonder.... What is God calling SPC to be as it grows up into its full maturity of faith, and into the likeness of Christ? Amen.