

Calling

(1 Samuel 3:1-20, John 1:43-51)

10:30 am, Sunday, January 15, 2012; Windsor UBC; J G White

Some of you got a call this week. A phone call from a member of our Nominating Committee. They asked you if you would stay on in a certain ministry, or would like to take on something new. They are “calling” people to serve among us.

Other opportunities abound, things for which you do not need to be officially nominated by the rest of us. You can attend some event or other. You can join this small group or that. You make choices about how you interact with your family members, your neighbours, your world, each day. Does your teenager get grounded or not for that? Do you visit your family member who in hospital every single day? You answer all such little callings as you see fit.

Are you listening deeply, when opportunity knocks? Listening to see if it really is of the Lord? We can practice this, and practice does make perfect, or at least, more perfect. ☺

Once in a while, as life goes on, bigger callings come along. Major life choices.

Elizabeth read for us a wonderful story from several thousand years ago, the story of a boy named Samuel. A boy who was dedicated to religious service, in the place of worship. He was a Jewish priest in training.

Then, he received a special call from God.

If you open your Bible to 1 Samuel 3, you can follow along. As I wonder about how the Lord God calls humans into service, I notice these things.

Young Samuel was already an apprentice, working under an old priest. Now, Eli the priest, and his sons, were not doing a good job, but they were in charge, and Sam was there to learn the tools of the worship trade.

This time and place was not very good, actually. The spiritual life of God’s chosen people was poor. The Lord’s word was not getting through.

So the Lord calls. This is good. And the Lord speaks to someone who does not yet know Him, young Sam. Great, eh!

We sometimes don't expect God to communicate to someone who does not know God or even believe in God. But I think the Lord speaks to whomever He wants whenever he wants.

The voice of the Lord is heard by Samuel, but not recognized. He thinks it is old priest Eli. So we must remember that it is sometimes easy to miss out on God's call to us, even when we heard it. We mistake the source of the idea, the voice, the opportunity, or the warning.

Eventually, with the help of his old mentor, the Voice is recognized by Sam. Even his old teacher, who is about to be punished for his failures, helps the younger generation answer the calling voice of the Lord God.

When Sam answers, there *is* a word from the Lord... and it's a harsh one! The worship leaders are going to be overthrown and get what's coming to them. This is young Sam's boss and mentor God is talking about here!

So, no wonder Samuel does not want to tell his master; he's fearful. But his master wants to know. He insists Samuel tell.

When he does tell, the old priest accepts and affirms the word: "it is the Lord! Let Him do as He desires."

I hear a lot of lessons in this for myself about hearing from God and about leadership. I know personally about fear, the fear of telling what I might know. Fear that if I said what I believe is from the Lord, it would be trouble. Trouble for me, trouble for the ones I tell. So I play it safe, even though there sometimes are those who ask for my input, and need my input.

Like many people, I also am reluctant to answer God's call upon my life - I mean both the big picture and the little events. Throughout the biblical record and history are many reluctant servants of God. And yet their ministry turns out to be amazing.

Take, for instance, the author of hymn 123, Gregory the Great. Born about 1,462 years ago in Rome, Italy, Gregory became a great leader at a critical time in the Christian Church. Trained as a lawyer, he entered the monastery, and ended up leading the Western Church in worship reforms, doctrinal organization, and laid foundations for Middle Age Christianity. He was a monk and an abbot, and deeply loved that life of prayer and quietness, studying the scriptures and writing – he wrote a lot – and training

others in the practice and discipline of the Faith. He is even credited with plainsong chanting and how it was first notated: we call it Gregorian Chant, right? But this did not actually arise till a few hundred years after Gregory's death.

Gregory was a determined, energetic man, who suffered health problems as his life went on: facing indigestion, fever, and gout more and more through the years. Yet he led reforms and mission work that built the Church greatly. He was especially interested in reaching the pagans in Britain, France, Northern Europe, and dealing with heresy in Africa.

So who was Gregory? Just a monk? No. Against his will Gregory was ordained a Deacon by the Pope in 578, which displeased Gregory. He wanted monastic life, not administration in Rome. Many troubles and disasters were coming along in this era, and, among them, in 589 terrible flooding wrecked Rome and other areas. In the midst of this, Pope Pelagius II died, and immediately Gregory was acclaimed as Pope.

He did not want this. This would be a final farewell to quiet, monastic life. He even wrote to the Emperor of Rome to beg that his election to the Papacy not be confirmed. One of the city's officials suppressed the letter. Gregory did his duty and filled in doing the papal work, along with others, in this time of transition, and natural disaster and the plague that followed in Italy.

Finally, after six months, the Emperor confirmed Gregory's election as Pope. Gregory was horrified, and contemplated fleeing. One legend tells that he actually did flee the city and remained hidden in a forest for three days. He was found when his whereabouts was revealed by a supernatural light. So the story goes. He was carried to St. Peter's Basilica and consecrated Pope on September 3, 590.

From his first year of office he bemoaned the loss of his life of prayer and contemplation and discipline, and in a sense complained against being Pope regularly. Pretty much forced into this leadership, Gregory the Great did great work. So much of his writing survives, and a common part of the images of Gregory show a dove at his shoulder: it is the Holy Spirit, dictating to Gregory as he wrote.

Gregory the Great very reluctantly answered the call to be

Pope. But his ministry was amazing, all those centuries ago.

I'd wager that not a one of us will ever be called upon by God and elevated to Pope of the Roman Catholic Church. But our callings to be a Pastor, to be a parent, to work in a call centre, to retire, to go to college, to be a volunteer, each has its significance, and it's barriers. Many of our callings have things about them we fear, alongside the wonderful things about them that are a privilege and a joy.

Ten years ago *today* something happened that was very important to me, and somewhat significant for a number of you. Jan 15, 2002... Ten years ago today I began ministry as Senior Pastor of Windsor United Baptist Church. In my calling to WUBC, boy, was I reluctant, cautious, and slow to be convinced! I was not horrified, as Gregory was about the papacy, but I was very slow to hear the clear call of God to this place and that time. Eventually, I said 'yes.' I am very grateful for that initial call from Eric Smiley, chair of the Pulpit Committee. I recruited Elizabeth today, and Rollie, because they were on that Pulpit Committee, along with Eric Boyd, and Frances Woodman.

As I included Jeff Hosick in worship today, I remember that he was *not* included in the process of calling me! After I agreed to come, and the congregation voted to call me here, and I accepted, *then*, Jeff H got in touch with me, and we met one night in a Tim Horton's in Amherst. You (Jeff) could have easily ended up with a Senior Pastor who would put an end to your ministry here! I am so grateful for you, these past ten years.

Starting my eleventh year *today*, my mind is very much on how my calling changes. And how yours does too.

Our callings from the Lord shift and change and grow as life goes on. You get a new job, maybe that position you've been waiting for. Your calling from God will be at least subtly different. Or you become unemployed, or underemployed: your life purpose can seem very different, or even lost: yet the Lord surely has good purpose for you in this circumstance.

You have children and your calling changes. They become teenagers, and your calling as a parent shifts and is different. The kids move out, or get married, or have their own children; as grandparent your calling to serve the Lord shifts again.

Your health changes... problems arise. Hear anew the Lord calling you. You get to that magic age, like Ron Baxter has now, and retirement comes. (Ron was my predecessor here as Senior Pastor; this afternoon is Ron's retirement party in Wolfville.) What is Ron's calling now? And what is yours, five, ten, twenty years into your retirement?

I am noticing that our callings change, even in the same position. A Senior Pastor changes over the years in the same Church with the same ministry description. I do things differently now than ten years ago here. Some ways of mine that have not changed still need to be transformed by the Spirit in my life. So I have been examining leadership lately: talking about this with our deacons. Reading up on it. I just started meeting with an older, wiser fellow pastor – a non-Baptist – to talk about my leadership and where it is going here (myself) and here (among you).

I like where I've been going in my life, and I thank the Lord for that. I want you to like where your life is headed too, despite the troubles or disappointments that come and are so real. We can, even at our most religious and spiritual moments, have a thing or two to learn about our personal calling in life.

I remember well a woman at Divinity College whom I dated for a time. Then, she said this was her calling: she was getting her Masters of Divinity because she felt called to be in ministry with her husband. She was not married then. She and I did not get married. I think now, twenty years later, she is still not married. I hope her sense of calling from God has developed.

Our "calling" is just another way to talk about God's purpose for our lives. Important that we get this right. Our corporate calling is our Church mission. Getting clear messages from the Lord on this is also vital. Then, the mission must be at the centre. The Pastor is not at the centre, the building is not at the centre, keeping things calm and positive is not at the centre. The mission of God for us is our centre.

As we walk with the Lord, our mission from God might be changing. Also, we might be seeing it more clearly, and that changes things for us.

Let's wind up this sermon with our memory verse again:

**"Come to Him, a living stone...
chosen and precious in God's sight,
and like living stones,
let yourselves be built into a spiritual house..."**

First Peter two, four & five.

Good news! The Lord calls on you to follow Him.

He speaks to us, His servants.

He has a calling for you, and for us, Windsor Baptist.

He did not make you for a calling,

He made a calling, a purpose, for you, for today.

Let us pray.

Pastoral Prayer: Let us pray.

Inviting God, whose outstretched arms are ready to welcome and whose heart flows with steadfast love for all: may we be confident in Your listening ear, and be guided in our praying.

We continue to seek blessings for people of our own Windsor Baptist flock, people such as Julie, and all others whose health concerns frighten them and make life very hard: may they find healing in every way You provide it, Lord God, and find strength to live. People such as Clayton, and all others in long term care: may they be comforted in living in a place that is not home. And we pray, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for people who are feeling they do not belong in the fellowship of Windsor Baptist: may Your leadership and support be strong in their souls, and if they leave us, may You draw them into another fellowship of believers, and bless them.

Calling God, whose will is powerful, whose message important, whose voice is subtle and true: keep teaching us, this year, to know our Master's voice. Use Your holy written word, use inner promptings and inspiration, use the personal sharing of the fellowship. Lord Jesus, teach us to pray, as You taught Your disciples of old to pray, by keeping us with You, day and night.

Spirit of God! descent upon our hearts;

Wean it from earth; through all its pulses move;

Stoop to our weakness, might as Thou art,

And make us love Thee as we ought to love. AMEN.