

Here We Are

I Samuel 3: 1-11



©Rev. John Weicher
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So, here we are. Friends, it has been a wonderfully bittersweet last month together. It has been a joyful and loving, challenging and fabulous twelve years together. And more about that in a bit. But here we are, one last time, together in a worship space. There you are. And here I am.

“Here I am,” is one of those special Biblical phrases, as you might now, significant every time we hear it, whether it’s on the lips of Mary or Abraham or Moses. “Here I am” means I am fully present, I am humble, I am ready to serve. So we ought to listen a little more closely now that Samuel’s said it three times over. Indeed, his very name means “Listen to God” or “Obey God” in the Hebrew, and he lives in the Temple like it’s some sort of never-ending lock-in, so it’s not surprising that this young person so easily utters such a holy and important thing.

“Here I am” means that something big in our faith story is about to happen. So, here we are.

This story happens to be one of my very favorite in the Bible, and not just because it’s captured in the stained glass window in Loeffler Chapel. The lectionary text this week is actually the story of Passover from Exodus, but I didn’t think that would preach too well today. So it was easy for me to pick this well-known and well-loved favorite instead, especially because it turns out that there is a lot to do when you’re finishing up after 12 years of ministry in a place - and I haven’t even begun packing yet. But for all my familiarity, there’s something I realized for the first time this time around, because that’s how the Bible works. In verse 7, it says that “Samuel did not yet know the Lord,” which means, for all the calling in the night, he couldn’t even conceive of the idea that it might be God doing it. We like to think that we are wiser and smarter than young Samuel and even old Eli that we would have figured out that something was weird maybe after the first calling and certainly by the second. Samuel couldn’t even imagine it, but there he is, showing up not once, not twice, but thrice, because that’s just the kind of person he is, attentive and humble and ready to serve.

And so it turns out that we are much like Samuel, ourselves. On our bad days, we cannot conceive that God might be calling us to something, something immediate and direct and in the real world. And on our good days, we still cannot really conceive of what that might actually be, of the specific future into which the divine invitation beckons. And that’s not because of who we are. For we are wise and faithful and decent, as much as any folks are. It is instead because we are human, every last one of us, and generally, humans don’t really get to know what God is up to until God calls out four times in the middle of the night or speaks out of a burning bush or visits us in a garden after dying. As a rule, we don’t get to look over God’s shoulder to copy off of the divine homework, and so we find out as it happens, sometimes in huge dollops at Massanetta or in Nicaragua, but more often in dribs and drabs of confirmation classes, deacon visits and quiet moments at the beach.

But here is the miracle of who Samuel is. Not knowing doesn’t stop him from showing up. It doesn’t stop him from being attentive, humble and ready to serve. Maybe there really is something to be said for having more lock-ins. Because here Samuel is, every time. Here Samuel is, unfettered by his lack of divine knowledge. Here Samuel is, faithfully and full of faith. One of my prayers for you in the days to come is that you will continue to show up for God faithfully even when you don’t get to know what the plan is, even when your imagination is limited by your humanity. Being me, of course, I say that looks like program and worship participation, summer trips and Sunday school, pledging and serving, all of the things that make up an active life in Swarthmore Presbyterian Church.

And one special word about that to our youth, to my beloved youth: if you are worried about whether something like our summer internship or Youth Sunday is still going to happen, it will, if you want it to. Show up and speak up for God, in partnership with those adult leaders you know and love. It is just as much your church as anyone's, and folks aren't trying to take anything away. But if it is to be yours, you must claim it, just like your faith. And know that there is another youth minister coming, one soon for right now and another more permanently later on. You will be cared for. God is not done here, not by a long shot, not with you. You never graduate from God or from church. So show up for God, for church, and for those new minister types.

But of course showing up like Samuel doesn't stop at the church doors. It means showing up for God in the public square, armed with the good news of the Gospel, that life is stronger than death and love is stronger than hate and we are our sibling's sibling, no exceptions. No exceptions. It means showing up for God in our relationships - romantic, familial, professional or simply with our friends. Attentive, humble and ready to serve, just like Samuel, come hell or high water, which, with the weather these days out west and down south, means a little more than it used to. Faith is not about being in control, but instead being on board with God anyway, maybe even because God is infinitely better at being in control than you are or I am. God really is. I promise. That's an antithetical idea to so much of our world. But it's so important for our world and for our souls. I dare us all, myself included, to have that kind of Samuel faith.

And there's another thing about Samuel. He needs Eli. Without Eli, he'd just be waking up every five minutes and then going to wake Eli up every five minutes, all night long. That's no way to live. Even new parents like Ashley and Paul Charles get more sleep than that. Without Eli, Samuel never gets clued into who God is and what God's claim on his life might be. Without Eli, his ears never tingle. Heaven forbid any of us ever go through life without both of our ears ever tingling from hearing what God is doing. That, too, is no way live. Samuel needs Eli to be his best self. And Eli needs Samuel just as much, to help him hear God's plan. With Samuel, Eli has hope, hope in the theological sense, hope with a capital H. Certainly, our hope is in God, but it is a team sport.

So, we need each other, as a congregation in a crazy and tumultuous world, as a loving intergenerational community of faith, as what I hope is the most honest place in town. We haven't always been the best at that, but I hope we've learned from the hard years. Indeed, feeling like you belong to the alternative community of the church is the first mark of a mature faith. Belonging and recognizing that this place and this group is distinct from any other are the bedrock of SPC's youth ministries over the years, and it's the theological justification I use to play hours of Donkey Ball, Sardines, Underground Church, Wink and every other ridiculous game or activity that has graced these hallowed halls. But the thing about mature Christian faith is that it's not just for youth, unlike, say, Poison Chair, which is definitely just from youth. Belonging to an alternative community is important for our first graders who just got Bibles today and for their grandparents, too. It is only once we have that that we can go on to saying our faith out loud, claiming our Spiritual gifts, and trusting in that capital H Hope, which are the other 3 marks of a mature faith. Samuel and Eli together, young and old together, listening for God and helping the other to understand, trusting each other and making room for the gifts of the other, even when it is frustrating and hard and unclear and no one seems to be getting enough sleep. Attentive, humble and ready to serve God and each other and neighbor.

So, now for the hard part. Now for the end. I don't much like endings, as anyone who has ever been to Montreat or Massanetta with me can tell you. I have perfected the Spiritual art of remaining in the moment, because it slows down time and pushes back the end of wonderful experiences in thin places to their very limit. But I can push back it no further.

So thank you. Thank you for being my faith home, my alternative community, for 12 years, almost a third of my life. Thank you for making promises to raise my son in the faith when he was baptized here and for hopping on to those made to my daughter when she was baptized at Wayne Pres. Thank you for the joy and sadness and tears and laughter. Thank you for the freedom and encouragement to grow and learn and try and fail and try something else. One of the joys of serving in one congregation for so long is that I've been able to make better and better mistakes. I like to think that by now, I make the best mistakes that can be made. Thank you for the confidences and deep questions and earnest faith and sheer vulnerability you have entrusted to me.

Thank you for laughing at my jokes and for humoring me. Thank you for saying yes to all of the little and big things I've asked you to do or be a part of - the tasks, the ministry opportunities and leadership roles, the events and trips, everything from serving as a youth advisor to being Swaynmore to playing the role of Jesus in Readers' Theater in Chapel Worship. Adults, thank you for taking young people seriously. Young people, thank you for taking God seriously.

Thank you for being my Eli when I was Samuel, for showing God to me in a deeper way that I had not conceived of before. And thank you for being my Samuel when I was Eli, ready to show up for God knows what. The truth of it is that all of us are both Samuel and Eli, depending on who we're with and what we're up to. My favorite memories of these last twelve years are of when we drew closer to God because of each other, Samuels and Elis together, and became family in the process. I pray for a future for you full of all sort of Samuels and Elis, participating together in the alternative community that helps us to understand and follow the divine Three-in-One, Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost.

So, thank you. I love you deeply. I will miss you dearly. I'm excited to celebrate with you. And even more excited about the holy futures, yours and mine, into which God calls us by name, ceaselessly, it seems, like a voice in the night that will not leave us along. Here we are, O Lord, for you called us. Amen.