

### ***The Lord is Calling***

In the name of him who calls his disciples and bids them, “Follow me”, dear friends in Christ: Not long ago I purchased an answering machine for the parsonage to replace the old one which had given up the ghost. This new model is equipped with an audio feature for the caller identification; so when someone calls, it announces – in a very computerized-sounding feminine voice – who the caller is. Rather, I should say, it attempts to say who the caller is. I suspect that the program it uses to read and pronounce whatever name shows up on its little screen was written by someone whose native language is other than English; I’m guessing Chinese. The result is that a lot of times when the phone rings, if the person has a simple name, I can make it out: “Call from John Smith”. Then I can tell who the caller is. It’s pretty much up in the air when someone local is calling from their mobile phone. Then all I get is, “Call from cell phone I A”. That could be anybody. Ah, but what it does with some of your names of Germanic extraction is truly frightful. With names like Wellhausen, Nothwehr, Goecker, it doesn’t do very well. Then all I get is “Call from *sounds that are horrible and hard to reproduce*”. I shudder to think what it would do with names like Von Dielingen or Stubbendick. Anyway, the upshot is that when receiving a call from some of you, I’ll attempt to decipher the horrible sound the machine makes, think maybe it’s one person, and then I’m surprised to find out it’s someone else altogether – maybe even someone I don’t know at all.

Which is something like what young Samuel experienced as we heard in today’s Old Testament lesson. Three times he thought he was being called by old Eli, the high priest of Israel. It turns out that it was the Lord himself who was calling. But Samuel didn’t recognize the voice of the Lord. In fact, as the text explains, Samuel didn’t even yet know the Lord. To Samuel he was an unknown caller.

And that should strike us a rather odd because at this point young Samuel, likely in his mid-teens, had been serving in the Lord’s House for over 10 years. You may recall the story of his birth: how his mother Hannah had been unable to bear children, and how desperately unhappy she was on account of it. In her misery she prayed to the Lord that if he would open her womb and give her a son, she would give him back, dedicating her son to the Lord’s service from his youth. The Lord complied. Hannah bore a son. She was overjoyed. And she named him Samuel, “God hears”, because she said, “God has heard my prayer.”

And true to her word, she kept her part of the bargain. After he’d been weaned at around three years old (they weaned late in those days) she brought Samuel to Shiloh where the Tabernacle of the Lord had been set up permanently since the days of the conquest under Joshua. There she left her son in the custody of Eli, the high priest, explaining to him the promise that she’d made. And thus Samuel entered the Lord’s service at a tender young age.

Now you might ask, “How could a loving mother do that? Just leave her little child in the hands of near strangers and walk away?” The answer is that it was all part of the Lord’s plan. Her barrenness, her sad misery, her desperate prayer – they were the Lord’s way of preparing and calling her to make this great sacrifice. You see, the Lord intended to shake things up at Shiloh. He planned a change of administration. And to do what he wanted to do, he required the services of a young man like Samuel.

What was wrong at Shiloh? Just about everything – and they were getting progressively worse. As we heard, Eli, who was responsible for leading the religious life of the nation, was old and nearly blind. He had entrusted most of his priestly duties to his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas. And they were a pair of really bad apples. They did not know the Lord or honor him. Instead, they saw their high profile jobs as a way to take advantage of people and enrich themselves. They were also flagrantly immoral. Both of them were married and had families, but it was common knowledge that they were sleeping with a lot of the other women who worked at the Tabernacle, the ones who washed and maintained the priestly garments and did the cooking and what not. Fine example they were setting for the nation. If the priests don't have to keep the commandments, why should anyone else? But even worse from a spiritual perspective, they were mishandling and robbing from the sacrifices people brought to offer to the Lord. This made people angry and resentful, of course; but the biggest damage it did was that it called into question the effectiveness of the whole system of worship. If when I bring a lamb to the Lord's altar to offer it as a sacrifice for my sins, and the priests there are evil, unbelieving men who don't do what they're supposed to do with it, then are my sins really forgiven? And if not, then how can I be saved? If the one provision God has given us to atone for sins isn't working, then we are all in a world of hurt.

And the sad thing is, Eli was well aware that this was going on. More than that, he knew what the Lord was calling him to do about it: to act like a father and discipline his sons, and to act like the high priest and restore the integrity of the nation's worship. He knew what he was called to do. But he failed to act. The best he could manage was to weakly wag his finger at his sons and say without any real conviction, "What's this I've been hearing about you boys? Oh, you shouldn't be doing that." To push him to more assertive action, the Lord sent a prophet to Eli to warn him of the judgment that would fall upon him and his sons if things continued the way they were. It was the Lord's call for him to repent and set things right. But instead of doing what the Lord was emphatically calling him to do, he simply shrugged his shoulders and said, "Oh well, I guess God has made up his mind. There's nothing I can do about it." So pathetic.

This is why Eli and his sons needed to be replaced. This is why the Lord made arrangements to have Samuel brought to his House and raised there. And it goes a long way to explain why Samuel didn't know the Lord or recognize his voice when he called: the people who should have been teaching him about the Lord and his Word were altogether worthless. They weren't doing what they were called to do. Imagine what you'd learn having Hophni and Phinehas as your Sunday School teachers. On second thought, maybe it's better not to imagine it.

In any case, because those in charge weren't heeding the Lord's call, the Lord decided to call someone who would. And that he chose Samuel was meant in some ways to shame Eli and his sons. He was, after all, an unschooled child. They probably treated him like a household servant, assigning him all the scut-work and other menial tasks they didn't want to do. But the third time Samuel came to Eli in the night in what he thought was a response to the old priest's summons, it must have occurred to Eli that God had given up him. I mean, if anyone should be hearing from the Lord, it's the high priest of Israel. But God isn't talking to me. He's talking to this kid. He's calling a mere boy who will listen to him because the three grown men he's already called aren't listening. To Eli, this must have been a cold slap in the face. He had it coming.

And he got another one the next morning. As we heard, the fourth time the Lord called Samuel, he replied as instructed, "Speak for your servant is listening." It's actually a word play on his name. I said before that Samuel means "God hears", but it could also be translated "he

hears God". And so Samuel did. The message God gave him was a final sharp word of condemnation to Eli and his wicked sons; so sharp indeed that in the morning when Eli asked him what the Lord said the night before, it pained Samuel to have to deliver the message. According to the Lord the three of them were soon to be destroyed for their blasphemies and their corrupting of the sacrifices and no atonement would be made for them in time or eternity.

It wasn't long afterward that this judgment of God fell on the house of Eli. But there are several things to highlight in this biblical account. The first is God's patience and forbearance to Eli and his sons. They had been given positions of honor and responsibility in the service of the Lord. They were called to great things; but what they were doing had the potential to destroy peoples' faith and ruin their souls forever. That the Lord did not destroy them immediately, but rather gave them several stern warnings and plenty of time to repent demonstrates his extreme longsuffering and kindness. He meant to give them every opportunity. That's how concerned is he that no sinner be lost – even sinners as contemptible as Hophni and Phinehas.

Second, we see God's grace and mercy to his people in delivering them from these wicked leaders and their corrupting influence. To be sure, in his grace, when the hammer fell on Eli and his sons, the Lord had already placed Samuel in the Temple, made himself known to him, called him as a prophet, and made provision to ensure that the sacrifices of atonement for the forgiveness of his peoples' sins would continue – and be done properly – through the ministry of Samuel. Interestingly enough, Samuel is the only Old Testament figure who held a threefold office: that of priest, prophet, and judge – which in turn points ahead to Jesus whose three offices are prophet, priest, and king. And as he did through Samuel, so also in Christ the Lord restored proper worship among his people over and against those who had corrupted it and turned it into blasphemous money making scheme. The difference is that through Samuel the Lord restored the meaning and efficacy of the temporal sacrifices of atonement, but through Christ and his suffering and death on the cross, he fulfilled the ultimate and only truly efficacious sacrifice of atonement – the one to which all those other sacrifices merely pointed. Thus Samuel serves as a prophetic foreshadow of Jesus and his ministry.

And called by the Lord, Samuel gave himself to a lifetime of faithful service during one of the most tumultuous times in Israel's history – that era when they were making the transition from leadership of the judges to that of the kings. Throughout that difficult period Samuel was the stabilizing agent, the steady hand, and the reliable spokesman who could be counted upon to speak God's Word precisely as it had been given to him even when (at times) he didn't very much like what the Lord had to say. Samuel remained faithful in all things, even as the Lord called him to be.

And that, I believe, is the most important application for you and me. It's fair to say that we too are living in some tumultuous times both for the world at large and for the Christian Church. And we too have been called by the Lord. No, not audibly in the middle of the night like Samuel was directly by the Lord; but called nevertheless by God's Word and Spirit in Holy Baptism – that's when God made himself known to you. That's when he called you by name. That's when he made you his own. And that's when he appointed you to his royal priesthood – the priesthood of all believers.

And in this priesthood, he calls to you daily. He calls you to repent of your sins and receive his forgiveness for Christ's sake. He calls you to trust in the full atonement he's made for you in Jesus his Son. He calls you to attend his Word with eagerness, to study it, to read, mark, and meditate upon it in order to fill you with godly wisdom and equip you to do his will. He calls you to corporate worship in his Church to receive the gifts of his grace. He calls you to

learn to discern his voice over and against false prophets who claim to speak for him, and false teachers who twist and turn his words. He calls you to follow Jesus, not necessarily into the ministry as he called Samuel and the Apostles, but to fulfill faithfully as a Christian – that is, consciously bearing Christ's name and acting as his representative – whatever roles, occupations, and offices you're in. What people who do not know the Lord and who are on the outside of the Church will learn about our Christian faith, they will hear and see in you. This is your calling. This is what the Lord is always calling you to do. Therefore let us not be resistant like Eli, who knew what God was calling him to do and failed to act; and let us not be like Hophni and Phinehas who through their wicked actions bore false witness about the Lord; but let us take our cue from Samuel, who, when the Lord called, said, "Speak, for your servant is listening", for by his speaking he will reveal himself, make us faithful, and equip us to do his will. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***