

January 14, 2018 – 1 Samuel 3:1-10 & John 1:43-51

Why are you here? I mean, here. In church. This morning. Right now. For most of you, coming to church on Sunday morning is a regular occurrence.

You might be away now and then. But, for the most part, you've got your pew that you always sit in. You've got your parking spot that you always park in. You've got your friends that you always greet.

You're here week after week. It's part of your routine. One that you may have had since childhood. One that your parents may have had. And their parents. And their parents. Why? Why are you here?

For some of you, maybe it really is just a habit. A good habit, but still a habit. I've heard plenty of people say that their week just didn't seem right if it didn't start with going to church on Sunday morning. There was just something off about the whole next week when they were absent from church.

Others may be here because they truly enjoy it. They enjoy the hymns. They enjoy reading the Bible. They enjoy fellowship with other believers. It's a pleasant thing to do. So they do it.

Still others may have a more Law-oriented view of things. They're here because God said, "Go to church." Well, not in those exact words. But he did say, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." And this is probably the most important way that we do that. So they're in church because that's what God wants.

Here's the thing: all of these are good reasons to go to church. I'm not criticizing any of them. It's good to make going to church a habit. It's good to enjoy the divine service. It's good to obey the Third Commandment.

And while all of those reasons may be good enough to get you out of warm bed on a cold January morning like today, they still don't really answer the question, "Why?" Why is going to church a good habit? Why do you enjoy the worship service? Why did God make remembering the Sabbath a law?

On the surface, our lessons for today don't say a word about going to church on Sunday morning. But underneath the surface, they have some important things to teach us about Word and Sacrament. And about why we're all here right now.

We'll start with our Old Testament lesson. This is the story of a great man of God named Samuel. Except that he's not a great man of God yet. He's a boy. Or, at least, a young man. We don't know exactly how old. But young enough that he's still serving under Eli's supervision.

Samuel has finished his day working the Temple, probably doing all of the physical labor that Eli can't. Eli is elderly and virtually blind, after all, and there's a lot of cleaning and such that needs to be done in and around the Temple. And Samuel decides to do something that is rather odd.

He lies down in the Temple. And not just anywhere in the Temple. He lies down where the ark of God was. Samuel has decided to camp out in the Most Holy Place. The Holy of Holies. He is resting next to the Ark of the Covenant.

The Ark that you can't even touch without being struck dead, Indiana Jones style. The Ark that the High Priest only approaches once a year, and even then with great preparation and caution. The Ark that is the throne of God on earth. The place where the glory of God dwells. The most holy place in all of creation.

And Samuel is taking a nap there. It was a hard day. He needs to lie down. This just seemed like a good spot.

Truth be told, we don't know why Samuel was lying down next to the Ark of the Covenant. The text doesn't really say if it was due to the fatigue or if he was lying prostrate in prayer, perhaps.

All we know is that he is there. In this place where God has promised to always be present. And suddenly, he hears the voice of God. And it surprises him. It surprises him so much that he assumes it must be Eli calling to him. Which surprises Eli too, because it wasn't.

And then it happens again. And they're both still surprised and confused by what's going on. And it's finally not until the third time that the light bulb goes on for Eli. And he tells Samuel to respond to God by saying, "Speak, for your servant hears."

Now, on the one hand, we can say, "Sure, this whole story makes sense." You hear someone call your name, your first reaction is to assume that there's a person calling you. And that it's not the voice of God.

Then again, you and I aren't normally lying down next to the Ark of the Covenant. You and I aren't normally sitting in the Most Holy Place. You and I aren't normally dwelling in the very presence of God.

Or are we? You see, that's where this story connects to us. Because we do dwell in the presence of God. Every week. More than every week, for many of us. Every time we open God's Word, every time we receive His sacrament, we're in the presence of God. We're in the place that He has promised to be. And he's speaking to us.

That's a lesson that Nathanael would learn as well. Philip meets Jesus, hears his call, and immediately knows that there's something different about him. This man is the fulfillment of all the Law and Prophets.

So he runs to tell Nathanael about him. And Nathanael's response, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" He has no faith in Jesus. He has less than no faith in Jesus. He is a complete skeptic.

Until, like Philip, he meets Jesus. He talks to Jesus. Jesus mentions that before Nathanael arrived, he was sitting under a fig tree. It's the tiniest, most mundane prophecy that Jesus could possibly give him. Little more than a parlor trick compared to what Jesus will later do. But because he's in the presence of God, Nathanael believes.

There is something powerful about being in the presence of God. Our culture, even our Christian culture, often has a warped idea about what it means to be in God's presence. Churches all over this country equate the presence of God with warm, fuzzy emotions or people talking in gibberish or some other mystical moment.

But being in the presence of God isn't any of those things. Being in the presence of God is about being where God has promised to be. In ancient Israel, that was the Ark of the Covenant. In the Gospels, that's the incarnate Christ.

And for us, that's Word and Sacrament. That's the divine service. That's Sunday morning worship. The reading the God's Word. And the administration of Baptism and the Lord's Supper and Absolution. That's the places where God has promised to be.

The places where God has promised to speak to us. Like he spoke to Samuel. Like he spoke to Philip and Nathanael. Like he speaks to us. When he proclaims, "I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

Why are you here? You're here to be in the presence of God. You're here to say, "Speak, for your servant hears." You're here to have God speak to you.

And then receive the good news that God was made man. Died for your redemption. And has forgiven you all your sins. That he has had grace upon you and forgiven you even during those times that you were only here out of habit, or enjoyment, or the burden of the Law.

Because even when you are as oblivious as Samuel or as skeptical as Nathanael, God still comes and call you by name. God still comes and says, "Follow me." God still comes, opens heaven, and shows you the greatest gift of all. His Son making a way to eternal life for you. Amen.