

January 14, 2023 – 1 Samuel 3:1-20 & John 1:43-51

There's always been a tension between sacred spaces and children. Because you want children in church. You want them hearing God's Word and praying and singing hymns. It's good to have children in church. And parents should never fear to bring them into the sanctuary.

And yet, we do. We do get anxious about bringing our children into church. Because children are unpredictable little creatures. And while we want them here, we also want to maintain the sacredness of this space, for ourselves and everyone around us.

The solution, of course, is teaching and training. Teaching children how to behave in church. Training them in what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior. And, of course, a good helping of patience and love as they learn.

One of the great things about our preschool and kindergarten is that we can teach these sorts of things on a daily basis. Everyday, the children come up for chapel. Everyday they learn that the church is not a place for running. It's not a place for yelling. It's not a place for putting your feet up on the pews. It's not a place for roughhousing or playtime or arguing. Instead, church is a place for prayer and singing and hearing God's Word. Church is a sacred space.

This same type of training happened in ancient Israel as well. You might remember that Jesus didn't go to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration until He was twelve years old. Why? Well, among other reasons, because as a child he wasn't even allowed into the inner courtyards of the temple. That was reserved for adult men only.

All of the mothers with their children were to remain in the outer courtyard. Where children would spend the first twelve years of their life learning how to behave in God's house. And when a boy finally reached twelve years old and became a man, going into that inner courtyard was a special event. He was walking into someplace special. Someplace sacred. And he knew it.

Which is why it's kind of surprising to read what we do in our Old Testament lesson for today. Our lesson is about Samuel. And if you don't remember it, Samuel's birth was rather miraculous.

You see, Samuel's father was a man named Elkanah. And Elkanah had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah had lots of sons and daughters by Elkanah, but Hannah was completely unable to have children. And Peninnah would ridicule her for that.

So Hannah prays for a child. And frankly, it's for pretty selfish reasons. She's sick of being bullied by Peninnah. She just wants one son so that this woman's cruelty toward her will end. But she promises that if God will give her this son, she will dedicate his entire life to service for the Lord.

It turns out, her promise wasn't empty. God gives her a son. And when he's old enough, she takes him to the temple and puts him into the service of the high priest. Basically puts him into full-time training to become a priest when he's older.

And that's where Samuel is when this passage begins. A young boy, living and working with the high priest, a man named Eli. Now, Eli was a very good high priest. But he had some sons of his own who were also priests and who had grown up to be just really rotten men. We learn more about that at the end of the passage.

I'm just going to focus on the beginning. And it says, *"The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was."* Now, in case you're confused, this isn't The Temple in Jerusalem. That hadn't been built yet. This is the Tabernacle, which functioned as the temple of the Lord for many years after the Exodus, until the permanent Temple was built.

And according to this passage, Samuel decided to do something rather odd. Rather mind-boggling. Something that could have been rather foolish, but turns out alright.

You see, Samuel is camping out in the Tabernacle. And not just anywhere in the Tabernacle. He's camping out where the ark of God was. In the Most Holy Place. In the Holy of Holies. He's sleeping next to the Ark of the Covenant. The most sacred spot in all of Israel. A place so holy that if he were to accidentally bump into the Ark of the Covenant, God would strike him dead on the spot, Indiana Jones style. That is where Samuel has decided to go to bed.

And Eli has let him. Now, I don't know if this has to do with Eli being nearly blind. Or the fact that, if he had no discipline for his own sons, he probably hasn't set any rules for Samuel either.

Whatever the case, that's where we're at. And as far as we can tell, Samuel is oblivious to all of this. He thinks it is perfectly acceptable to make the Most Holy Place his personal bedroom.

That is, until he starts hearing a voice. And the text specifies that God had never spoken to Samuel before and he has no idea what it sounds like. So he thinks it's Eli speaking. Three times, in fact, he runs back to Eli asking if the old man had called for him. Eventually, Eli puts it's all together. And instead of running to Eli, Samuel invites the Lord to speak to him.

Again this is rather odd. This young boy hearing a voice calling to him. Today, we'd probably be on the phone with a doctor the next morning. "Hello, doctor? My son is hearing voices." But Eli realizes something that we need to realize.

This voice comes to Samuel as he's lying in the Most Holy Place. As he's lying next to the Ark of the Covenant. This place wasn't just holy. It wasn't just sacred. It was the very presence of God. God had promised that he could always be found in this place. This was God's home on earth.

So, to a certain extent, it makes perfect sense. Samuel has made himself at home in God's home. He doesn't realize it, but has put himself in God's presence. And God starts speaking to him.

God, in fact, calls out to him. Calls him by name. Not just to deliver one message. But a lifetime of God's Word to His people.

And really, the same thing happens in our Gospel lesson. Jesus goes up to Galilee, the home of two men named Philip and Nathanael. He walks up to Philip and says, "*Follow me.*" Philip runs to find Nathanael and brings him to Jesus. Jesus blows Nathanael away with an act of pure prophecy. Together, they proclaim, "*We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote... Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!*"

But were they looking for him? No. They're just doing their normal daily work. Going about their day without even realizing that they are standing in the presence of God.

And so God starts speaking to them. God, in fact, calls out to them. Calls them by name. Not just to deliver one message. But a lifetime of God's Word to His people.

That's the pattern we see throughout scripture. If you want to hear God speak, just put yourself in His presence. If you want to know God's calling for your life, stand beside Him and listen.

Because God has called you. I know He has called you because He has baptized you. You've already stood in His presence once before. Maybe it was an infant at a font like ours. Maybe you were older. Maybe it was in a kiddie pool or a river or a lake.

Whenever, wherever it was. You stood in the Most Holy Place. You stood in the presence of God. Like Samuel camping out in the temple. Like Philip and Nathanael blindly bumping into their Lord. Like the naive children that we all are, regardless of our age.

When you were baptized, you entered a place more sacred than any other on this earth. And God called you by name. He called to you and He said, "Follow me." And He gave you a mission to deliver a lifetime of God's Word to His people. To share His love with all the world.

And to continue to come into His presence. And hear His calling again and again. Like Samuel making himself at home in the temple, we make ourselves at home at the Lord's Table. We eat and we drink and we rest in His presence. And no matter what we've done in the days and weeks prior, we hear Him say once again, "*Follow me.*"

As children of God, we have great respect for the sacred spaces He puts around us. Churches and chancels and altars. But as children of God, we also stumble into those sacred spaces all the time: Baptism, Communion, the whole of worship. Like a child, totally oblivious to where we are and who is standing right next to us. Still learning about the sacred spaces where God has promised to be present.

But that's OK. Because we are invited to be here. We called into the sacred. To stand in the presence of God. And make ourselves at home in His home. For all eternity. Amen.