

Invitations: Samuel 3: 1-20/John 1: 43-51

Both of our scripture readings this morning are considered call stories. They are narrations about God's placing a claim upon an individual in a very specific manner. Looking first at the setting for Samuel's call the story begins with this child being a gift from God to a barren woman named Hannah. After praying to God for a male child to relieve her barren state, she promises to dedicate her child to God. Hannah conceives and brings the child to the priest Eli at Shiloh when he is weaned. She brings him clothes once a year when he family makes their yearly pilgrimage to the Tabernacle. Eli, the priest, is an old man at this time. He has two sons which in the opening chapters of this narrative we are told "are scoundrels and have no regard for the Lord." Within the history of the Hebrew people this is the time described in Judges as being the time "where all the people did what was right in their own eyes." God is displeased with both Eli and his sons. Meanwhile Samuel is growing up there and begins find favor with the Lord and with the people who came to the tent of meeting to worship. He is exposed to the rituals and as today's passage begins we are told that Samuel is ministering to the Lord under Eli. According to our passage, "the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." We are also told that Eli's eyesight had begun to grow dim. These are not unrelated facts because Eli's failing eyesight is an indication that the Lord is no longer visiting him. Eli seems to be having trouble perceiving the word of the Lord spiritually as well as having trouble with his eyesight. As Eli's physical problems developed, Samuel was aiding him by performing some of the priestly duties, like keeping the lamp of God burning. On this occasion, Samuel was lying down within the priestly area of the tent of meeting near the Ark of the Covenant when he hears a voice calling him. The voice calls out, "Samuel, Samuel". Samuel assumes it is Eli calling him, so he answers "Here I am!" and quickly goes running to Eli. Eli tells Samuel that he hasn't called him and sends him back to bed. This happen three times before Eli begins to understand that it is the Lord who is calling to Samuel. After the third time Samuel goes into Eli, Eli tells him if he is called again to reply, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." This part of the narrative is very familiar to us and was often part of a Sunday school lesson when I was a child. The point of the lesson usually being simply that God calls and we should listen. Parts of the narrative that aren't usually dwelt on also carry a message for us. In the midst of the calls where Samuel keeps running into where Eli is, there is the statement that "Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him." If you stop and think about it, doesn't that seem a little strange? Samuel has been dedicated by his mother to the service of the Lord. He has essentially lived in close proximity to the Ark of the Covenant since he was brought to Shiloh when he was weaned. He has been aiding Eli in the duties of the priests. Yet the word of the Lord had not been revealed or uncovered for him. In the heart of the place of worship as well as among the people in the land, it seems that God's presence was not obvious. The passage began with the statement that the Word of the Lord was rare in those days. It was rare because those whose duty it was to be obedient and to lead the people "had no regard for the Lord." The people had moved away from God and so they lost contact with the visions and words which would guide them. This seems to be a path which it is easy for us to take. It has also seemed odd to me that Samuel did

not recognize that the voice he heard was not the voice of Eli who had essentially raised him. But the Lord is persistent with Samuel. When Samuel goes back and lies down again, the Lord comes and stands there and calls him again. The text does not tell us if the Lord appears in a vision to Samuel now because Eli has told him that it is the Lord's voice he has heard, or if the Lord decides to make the contact more visual so that Samuel will come to know him. But this marks the beginning of the relationship between Samuel and the Lord. The first message which the Lord has for his new prophet is not a pleasant one. It is a message about Eli and the coming destruction of his sons. This is not actually a new message to Eli, as he was warned that the behavior of his sons was bringing about their downfall. But since Samuel had been raised by Eli and was serving under him, this was not a message that he wanted to give to Eli. But Eli calls him and asks him for the complete message. We often end our reading of this passage at the point where Samuel responds and listens to the Lord. But it is also important that Samuel relayed the message completely to Eli. Eli accepts the Lord's judgment with humility and dignity. The relationship between Samuel and the Lord grows and all who heard Samuel knew that he was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord. Samuel's call was to bring the word of the Lord into a time and place where it had been ignored. Before Samuel learned who was calling him, his response was to respond quickly, Here I am and run to Eli. After he learns who is calling him, Samuel's response is a little different. He remains where he is and replies, "Speak, for your servant is listening." Samuel's call involved listening to God and then acting; conveying the message completely. I think that this is good advice for any of us. We want to be disciples but often we are so sure of our own understanding that we fail to pause and say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." When there are so many voices in our culture loudly claiming that they are speaking the truth and have the answers, perhaps we need to seek clarity about whose voice is speaking. Even within the church we need to pause for the institution of the church has not always been the voice of the Lord. "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." If we learn like Samuel did, to listen first and then act we may find that the word of the Lord is not as rare in the world as we sometimes feel. So if that is the message we need to hear from Samuel's call story, is that the same message we find in John's narration of the call of Jesus to his disciples. I think this gospel passage carries another important message for us. The most familiar call stories of Jesus' disciples come from Matthew, Mark, and Luke and involve Jesus walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and telling the fishermen there to leave their nets and follow him. This happens after Jesus returns from the wilderness where he is tempted. In the gospel of John there is no record of a time of temptation in the wilderness. Instead, after John the Baptist witnesses to who Jesus is to some of his own disciples, two of them leave John and begin following Jesus. When Jesus sees them following him, he turns and asks, "What are you looking for?" This happens before the opening of our morning's passage, but I often wonder what answer we would give if Jesus could ask that question of us. Their answer to Jesus' question is to call him "Teacher" and ask where he is staying. Jesus then issues the invitation, "Come and See." They accept the invitation and remain with Jesus. One of these men in this narration is Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. It seems that John's testimony was not sufficient to convince them that Jesus was the Messiah, but after spending some time with him they believe. Once Andrew is convinced that Jesus is the Messiah he brings Simon Peter to Jesus. Invitations play a key role in the gathering of the disciples. And it is important to note that Jesus is not always the first to issue the invitation to those gathered. Our passage

begins the next day after these three have gathered around Jesus. “The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Phillip and said to him, “Follow me.” This is more the pattern we are accustomed to hearing. Jesus finds someone and issues an invitation which seems more in the nature of a command. “Follow me.” And since the verb is indeed in the imperative tense, it was perceived as being a command. Phillip not only joins Jesus’ growing group, he goes and finds Nathanael and tells him the good news, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth.” It seems that Nathanael is a skeptic about this news. He responds, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” And Phillip responds much as Jesus had to those disciples of John who began following him, “Come and see.” Phillip did not go into a defense of his claim, instead he told Nathanael that he should “Come and see.” Nathanael with his skepticism accepts Phillip’s invitation and after his encounter with Jesus is convinced. Phillip’s response to the sarcastic comment by Nathaniel is to issue the same invitation that Jesus had earlier, “Come and See.” In this day and age it seems to me that many of us who have accepted Jesus’ invitation to follow have not acted as those first disciples. In response to the scorn often found in the secular world our response is either to be quiet or to be aggressively defensive. Phillip’s response is I think a better pattern and gets back to the heart of spreading the good news—of evangelism. This way is nothing more or less than inviting people to come and see Jesus, God’s gracious Word for themselves. To come and see those who are inspired by Jesus enough to try and follow him. To come and see how God continues to work in the world and in our lives. That really isn’t all that hard. And for some reason we have no problem doing it with some of our favorite activities—we invite people to share many things that we enjoy. Phillip just invites. And we can do the same. Perhaps those we invite will like what they find. And perhaps they won’t. Perhaps skeptics like Nathanael will find something they don’t expect. Or perhaps they will keep searching. None of that is what matters all that much because it really isn’t up to us what happens after the invitation. All we are called to do is invite—Come and See—God will do the rest. That’s where these two call stories have led me: Listen carefully for the voice of God among all the voices calling you to actions; then when you have heard what God is calling you to do—act upon it as faithfully as you can. Then share it. Tell others about how God invites you to participate in bringing the kingdom closer. Invite others so that they know how God is active here and now.