

“THE LIFE OF JESUS MADE VISIBLE”

1 SAMUEL 3:1-10, PSALM 139,
2 CORINTHIANS 4:5-12

MARKET SQUARE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN
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Our lectionary texts deal with two individuals in very different places in their call. Samuel is at the very beginning, the beginning of a life that will be defined and transformed by God. Samuel was serving Eli, a priest of the temple. As our text tells us, “Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.” Samuel must have known something of God for he was ministering along with Eli. He was a helper and servant, but our text makes it plain that he had not had a direct experience of God and did not yet understand the word of God. He was still new to the faith, in other words. What we do see in Samuel is eagerness and openness. When he hears what he assumes to be the voice of his mentor, he runs to Eli, “Here I am!” It takes Eli a few times to catch on before he realizes it is God calling to Samuel. Eli gives Samuel these words, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

Samuel reminds us that at some point in our lives, we must be introduced to faith and to God. Maybe like Tom and I, you grew up going to church every single Sunday from before your memories began because that was what your family did on Sunday mornings. Sunday was for church. Or maybe a friend brought you to Sunday school and it was there you were first introduced to the Bible stories on felt board or through crafts. Maybe it was your spouse that brought you to the church and introduced you to your new faith community. Or maybe it was a time of desolation and seeking that pushed you through the sanctuary doors looking for solace and meaning amid the madness.

Or maybe it was your mother, as was the case for Meg, who writes in her spiritual biography, “From my earliest memory, I was intimately acquainted with abandonment, poverty, loss and grief. My mother told me that Jesus is my friend, a friend at work for our good and peace, who will never leave us.” Meg continues, “What my mother told me was really in the simplest terms but the profound truth of it built the foundation for my life of faith and my sense of call.”

Meg is here today to be ordained partly because her mother seeking to comfort her children and to explain life's struggles, taught her daughter that Jesus was and is a faithful friend who will never abandon or leave her. The foundation, her introduction to God came from outside of herself but in time, it was Meg, who chose to utter the words, "Here I am" and "speak for your servant is listening."

The willingness to listen, the eagerness to follow, the openness to God had to come from within her own being. And so it is the case with all of us. A call cannot be answered if we do not know God or if we remain closed to the possibility of God's work and influence in our lives. Thankfully, Meg heard that call and answered with a resounding "Here I am," even when the way became muddy and unclear and seemingly impossible.

Paul had been at his call long enough to know the cost and toll of a life of service and faithfulness. Paul makes it quite plain that discipleship is demanding difficult work. He writes:

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;
Perplexed, but not driven to despair;
Persecuted, but not forsaken;
Struck down, but not destroyed;
Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus,
so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our bodies."¹

Paul makes it clear that while his call has required much of him, he has not been undone because God is at work within him. Paul has been at his ministry long enough to know and to have experienced God's power at work. He understands that if it were up to his strength alone, he would have been struck down by the affliction and persecution.

Paul compares himself to a clay jar. "But we have these treasures in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." To put a treasure in a clay jar, which is such a fragile and seemingly inept container, reminds us that it must be God's power at work, not our own that empowers us and emboldens us for ministry.

It is a humbling thing to be called into ministry, whether as a minister of the word and sacrament, an elder, a deacon, or as a layperson. We often feel as fragile and as inept as a clay jars, barely able to contain the grace and peace we are called to offer the world. We are so human and by that, I mean broken, conflicted, weak, and wounded and at the same time resilient, hopeful, strong and beautiful. As pastors, we are called as weak and wounded humans to minister to and on behalf of other weak and wounded humans. What a terrifying task it would be without the treasure and power of God we carry within us. I have no doubt my call to ministry would have driven me to despair if it were not for God's presence and Christ's life at work within and around me.

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 4:8-10

Certainly this is true for you, Meg. You are called to walk into places of loss, and death, and grief, and unimaginable heartache. You are called into parents' worst nightmares and there you must bear witness to the pain, to the breaking hearts, to the humanity, and to the beauty of the child no matter what catastrophe or ailment has befallen them. At times it must feel as if it could be undone, if it were not for the power of God and presence of Christ.

You say this beautifully in your spiritual biography, which is a work of poetry and art. You write, "I thought [CPE and] chaplaincy work would be "too clinical" and short and lean on any real theological depth. Instead I found the depths of depths and so many moments- both dark and light- where the Lord so clearly did abide. Through this work, my heart overflows with love and grief and hope and joy in the face of the very image of God in the human being right before me. "How can I love you, Lord? Where will I find you?" sometimes I have asked. The answer comes where one might not expect to find it: where a perfect 2 year old baby girl was catapulted into the woods; where a beautiful baby boy who had a name, who had a life, whose momma and daddy just always prayed him through it- just couldn't dialyze no more; where the rising sun and shining star of a poverty-stricken young black girl to the world of no account went to sleep but didn't wake up; where a sweet silly boy who loved his church and all manner of tomfoolery poured gasoline on a bonfire and never made it to Ohio; where a mother fell to the floor; where a father couldn't stay; where there was no comfort and we just all went home; where the way of it had no regard for any of us but where, O God I heard you cry at the depth of my own, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?" Where the steadfast love of the Lord is enough. Where, by the breath of a sigh too deep for words, you sanctify to them their deepest distress. Thanks be to God."

This trusting and witnessing to the fact that the steadfast love of the Lord is enough is how you, like Paul, allow the life of Jesus to be made visible. Each day, you see and experience, as many of us see and experience, the death of Jesus. We see it in our grief, in the end of relationships, in the death of children, in sickness that lingers, in the mistreatment of migrant families and children, in the rape and pillaging of our planet, in unrelenting racism, in the disdain for the poor, and in the abuse of power and prestige.

It is a gift of grace and the challenge and our call as Christians to witness to the life or the resurrection of Jesus, even in the darkest of places. For it is God who said, "Let light shine out of the darkness." It is God's power that shines through us when we speak words of mercy and comfort, when we resist that which does not align with the Gospel, when we fight for justice for migrants, refugees, immigrants, the poor, people of color, transgender individuals, or any other group or person who is maligned or mistreated, or when we simply name the humanness and beauty in another human being. Each of us in our own lives and ministry must find ways to let God's light shine in and through us so that Christ's resurrection may be made visible in our bodies and being.

A year or so ago, you, Meg, shared lunch with Tom and I overlooking the river. Tom asked you what you believed to be the core of your call or the core of what we are called to do as ministers. You said, you believed it is to bear witness. You are to bear witness

to Christ and to point to Christ whenever possible. You are also to bear witness to the humanness of each person you come in contact with, even if that human never actually drew a first breath. This is how you have chosen to make the life of Jesus visible in your body. By your very presence and your willingness to witness in the darkest and loneliest of places, you make Jesus' resurrection visible, even if those around you cannot yet see it. Your caring, your attention, your prayers, your tears, your silence, and your willingness to bear witness make Jesus real and make his resurrection visible. Praise be to God, for you and for your ministry.

I am going to end with your words because again because they are poetry and they are as true as anything I or anyone else could write. You say as you conclude your spiritual biography, "At first glance, even I think sometimes it looks like I am looking for redemption....of all the pains and losses of my own life, but I have thought it over and I confess I feel the call most deeply in the reality that in Jesus Christ, redemption is nothing I strive after; its promise is already free in the one who abides with us, and my deepest hope is to bear witness to that reality. I came here by the help of the helpless to bear witness to life, to resurrection, to great, deep joy, to the love that will not let us go."

Blessings in your ministry, Meg. It has been an honor and a privilege to walk with you, to learn from you, and to call you friend and colleague. I have no doubt you will serve Christ well as you seek to bear witness to his death and his life. Amen.