



Sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany, Jan. 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[1 Samuel 3:1-10\(11-20\)](#)

[John 1:43-51](#)

Blessings, friends. This week is an eventful week! We pause to reflect on the scriptures given to us this week, on this second Sunday in the season of Epiphany. Today's texts are both about God calling people into action, inviting them into new purpose.

Calling happens. Even when the word of the Lord seems rare in the world around us. God still calls forth from us our investment of our whole selves – heart, soul, mind, and strength – for the good of this world.

So, what is a calling?

We experience a calling in different ways. A sense of calling may emerge from a sense of fit, a belonging or finding of what resonates most deeply with us. It's kind of a recognition, an awakened passion. It's a kind of love for the people, the place, the project, the type of work we experience. And we sense it is the right thing for us to do.

We may hear the voice of God calling – sometimes literally and directly. We may hear the voice of God in other ways, through inner promptings deep within ourselves, or through other people stirring imagination and possibility and invitation for us. In a calling, we experience ourselves being named – being seen, being known, and being invited.

Our circumstances may touch our hearts and minds, and be the avenue for the voice of God and the moment when we feel we have been seen and known for who we are and what purpose we have to fill. Those circumstances may be from great, joyful occasions that invite us into good and beauty and truth and love. Or they may be from moments of intense sorrow and suffering, or cruelty and injustice, that we see or experience, inviting us to step forward and help restore the world.

God calls us to all sorts of purposes. Many of you worked or are working in arenas and fields because you felt called.

- Some in our congregation served in military service – but didn't just put in their time of service, and instead lived into it and embraced it as a calling, a deep purpose so much more than a job.

- I've met and worked with police who see their work as a calling – and some who don't
- I've worked with social workers and people in mental health work who see their work as a calling – and some who don't
- I have relatives who work or have worked in the secret service, who entered that work because of a sense of calling – including one who was killed at the gates of the CIA headquarters
- I've known so many doctors and nurses who entered their work with a sense of calling.
- And teachers. And professors.
- And builders, and architects and engineers.
- Mathematicians, for the love of numbers and patterns, like Katherine Johnson and Dorothy Vaughan, two of the NASA African-American women who calculated flight trajectories and re-entries for early space flights (as celebrated in the movie, *Hidden Figures*).
- Musicians, for the beauty of sound, like the German Johann Sebastian Bach who wrote and played for the love of music and the glory of God.

In each person's life, God calls. God calls you by name. Something stirs, and you are drawn and compelled to move toward what is calling you. And you give yourself to it.

Calling is toward God, toward the good, toward celebrating and living in that which is good, toward God's desire for good for all and our desire to bring good to as much of the world as possible – in all sorts of forms – beauty, truth, kindness and care, discovery and learning, honesty and clarity.

Young Samuel wants to be close to God. Even when the lamp of God had not gone out yet. Even when the light was only still dimly burning. Samuel goes to sleep on the floor of the temple, close to the ark of God, the ark of the covenant – the very seat of God's presence. Calling is toward God.

And when God calls, well, things will begin to happen. Not always in easy ways. Callings carry with them responsibility.

In Samuel's case, his entire calling as a prophet began with hard truth-telling to the one who had been his mentor and guide – to speak God's deep rebuke to Eli for turning a blind eye and behaving with weakness in regard to the abuses of his own sons, Hophni and Phinehas. These two as priests of the temple were committing two of the great sins of any leaders – embezzlement and sexual misconduct. Eli had given a gentle, cajoling reprimand but did nothing to enforce change. God gave Samuel the difficult message of God's judgment to carry to Eli. Samuel did not want to say what God had given him to say, to his mentor. But Eli knew that God had spoken, and told Samuel he needed to say it no matter what.

Samuel went on through his life as the first prophet to speak clear and often difficult words from God in a young nation.

Callings may come quite directly from God, like Jesus saying directly to Phillip, "Follow me." And sometimes, we respond immediately, like Phillip did.

Callings may also come through other people – and they often do! Phillip ran to find his friend, Nathaniel and told him about Jesus. Nathaniel responds a bit cynically and dismissively, but comes along with Phillip anyway – and then encounters Jesus who opens his eyes to himself in a new way, who gives him the gift of being seen and known. It changes Nathaniel's life. Nathaniel (often assumed to be the same as Bartholomew in the other gospels) may have carried forward the good news of Jesus into Armenia and from there to India. Phillip may have carried the good news of Jesus into what is now modern-day Turkey.

This week marks several important moments. Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Day. We mark that day with remembrances of King's sermons and speeches, the movement for civil rights and an end to discrimination by race and class, and spending the day in service to our communities. Tomorrow also is the feast of the Confession of St. Peter, remembering boldly answered Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" with a strong affirmation, "You are the Christ." And tomorrow begins the worldwide Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, when we join with other churches across denominations to pray that God will help us take steps to mend the breaks and tears in the family of Christ Jesus. In the midst of that week, this Wednesday, brings the inauguration of a new president in this country.

All of these things together are powerful moments that themselves can awaken us, stir us, call us. They belong together. When Peter says "You are the Christ," Jesus turns and names Peter and gives him a calling to be the rock on which the Church is built. When Martin Luther King goes to preach at the church on Dexter Street in Montgomery, Alabama, they respond by calling him to be their pastor – and then Martin needs to wrestle with two callings and to decide whether he wants to return to being a pastor or continue along toward another possible calling to be an educator. As we follow our calling, we need to test the spirits of the calling, to see if they are bringing the good that God truly desires. And our calling may lead us in all sorts of surprising directions, including political public service.

Martin Luther King, Jr., did not expect to or want to return to the South where he grew up under the demeaning realities of racial segregation. In his book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, he recounts his early journey. At the end of his studies, he was being approached by two northeastern churches and by several colleges and universities. Remembering how he wrestled with the call he received to the Dexter Street church in Montgomery, he wrote this:

"Now... I have a chance to escape from the long night of segregation. Can I return to a society that condones a system I have abhorred since childhood? These questions were still unanswered when I returned to Boston. I discussed them with my wife, Coretta... We discussed the all-important question of raising children in the bonds of segregation... The question of my wife's musical career came up... For several days we talked and thought and prayed over each of these matters. Finally we agreed that, in spite of the disadvantages and inevitable sacrifices, *our greatest service could be rendered in our native South. We came to the conclusion that we had something of a moral obligation*

to return—at least for a few years... The South, after all, was our home. Despite its shortcomings *we loved it as home, and had a real desire to do something* about the problems that we had felt so keenly as youngsters... Moreover, despite having to sacrifice much of the cultural life we loved, despite the existence of Jim Crow, which kept reminding us at all times of the color of our skin, *we had the feeling that something remarkable was unfolding in the South, and we wanted to be on hand to witness it.* The region had marvelous possibilities, and once it came to itself and removed the blight of racial segregation, it would experience a moral, political, and economic boom hardly paralleled by any other section of the country.” (pp. 7-8).

God’s calling does not lead us free from all peril, danger, sword, or suffering. God’s calling to us as followers of Jesus is to an adventure that includes the cross. God calls us to stand up, to speak, to act. The Japanese have a saying, “It’s the nail that stands up that gets hammered down.” The Gospel of Jesus Christ says, “Yes, and yet that is exactly the path to raise up those who have been beaten down.” The Way of Jesus includes the work of the prophet in speaking uncomfortable truths. It includes the work of the good Samaritan who crosses deeply ingrained boundary lines and puts self on the line to help someone in distress. It includes showing in our actions and words that we belong to Christ and will call for an end to unnecessary suffering in the world around us.

Two pastors in the South, an unlikely pair of a white Presbyterian pastor and a black Baptist pastor, both serving congregations in poor and working class communities, preceded Martin Luther King’s work by twenty-five years. These two, Claude Williams and Owen Whitfield, teamed up to help the rural white and black poor, first in Arkansas, then increasingly across the country, during the 1930s and 1940s. Their journey began in knowing the sorrow of people around them and in their own life. This is how the book, *The Gospel of the Working Class*, begins in telling their story:

In late 1934 Claude Williams, a white preacher in Paris, Arkansas, was asked by his neighbors to preside over the funeral of a ten-month-old baby. Williams, who was struggling to raise three small children with his wife, Joyce, agreed to perform the hardest task required of any preacher or of any father. But rather than quote a few words from scripture to calm the grieved souls in the pews, Williams said this tragic event was “not the will of God.” Instead, he charged that the baby’s unnecessary death from malnourishment was “an outright case of murder by our economic system.”

Although Williams had not yet met Owen Whitfield, an African American preacher who also hailed from the Southland, he might as well have been speaking about Whitfield’s son, John Marshall, who had died of pneumonia just a few years before. Or, he could have been eulogizing the senseless death of John Marshall’s brother, Excel Whitfield. Excel, whose name reflected his mother Zella’s hopefulness for their family when he was born in 1923, died of malaria at the age of eleven during the height of the Great Depression. Owen Whitfield shared the sorrow song of Claude Williams. He often told his congregants a story about one day in the field when he heard the hungry cry of his daughter come from the house and got angry. “I done worked, behaved myself, kept Your precepts,” he cried out to the Lord, “and those that haven’t is getting along much better.” And Whitfield heard God reply: “I bless you with enough product to fill many barns. Somebody’s getting’ it. If you ain’t,

that's your fault, not Mine." Lesson learned: religions was not about waiting for blessings to occur; it was about crying out against injustice, and challenging people to make their world anew."

This pair discovered each other and formed a brotherhood devoted to seeking freedom and empowerment for people who had lived under others' disdain, neglect, and abuse for generations. Their work set them on a journey together that ignited changes and new possibilities – and new hope – across the country. The journey was difficult. But they kept up their resolve until it was time for them to lay aside their work and make space for others to take up the efforts in new ways.

We do not know where God's calling will lead us. We may be prompted to fly rescue missions for stranded colleagues, launch new medical missions abroad or at home, start feeding or housing people in need, create pathways and support programs for men and women coming out of prison, teach a new generation of children, create art in story or canvas or stage that lifts up beauty and truth for others, enter public service in politics – yes, politics itself can be a calling, and many entered on this path with a sense that this is where God was calling them. We may be prompted to volunteer at a time of need in our community. We may be prompted to reach out in the moment to a neighbor or stranger we see with a word of encouragement. We may be prompted to come to someone's defense and to speak a word of rebuke. Calling does not simply belong to one period of life, some ideal younger period. It happens across our lives. The moment arises. How will we respond? Another moment arises. How will we respond?

In all of these callings and promptings and invitations – callings of the moment, callings of a life's path, callings for a time and place – in all of these, it is God calling us. "Samuel, Samuel!" "Lily, Lily!" "John, John!" "Judi, Judi!" In direct and indirect ways, God calls us by name, and waits for us to respond, to listen, and to move, and to shine with God's glory. So, stand up, rise up, follow, and shine.