

TEXT: 1 Samuel 3:1-20; John 1:43-51

TOPIC: God calls Samuel's name four times before he replies to God, returning faith to a central role.

SUBJECT: The underdog's way challenges complacency and evacuation plans for transformation of people and communities.

TITLE: The Underdog's Way

Growing up, my parents had this fun way of comparing our family with the Walton's. For those of you who never heard of the Walton's it was popular TV show from the 1970s and early '80's set in the depression of the 1930's.

The fun concept had my family living in Grand Lake, Colorado. My oldest brother would be the town banker; my second oldest brother would be the town's attorney; my sister would be one a school teacher; my next brother would own restaurants; and my brother next youngest to me would be the town's dentist and orthodontist. I would be like John Boy Walton, as the town's newspaper editor.

As the youngest in my family, I felt like the underdog, and I think that's what motivated me to want to make a positive difference in the world. I'll let God determine whether I've done that. When I was called, I had to figure out what scripture passage fit best. When I read 1 Samuel 3, I felt like I was reading about myself, so Samuel's story became my story.

I had no idea why God called me or what God had in mind. Only in recent years, have I started to understand what God has had in mind is all about letting God work through people's lives to heal and transform them in the most important and holy work any person will ever do.

PRAYER

First Samuel 3 is not about Samuel's religious awakening or spiritual maturity. Samuel is called by God when spiritual desolation, religious corruption, political danger, and social upheavals in Samuel's world echo the desolation, corruption, danger, and upheavals in Judea. The Israelite people were not only still licking their wounds from the destruction of the temple

in Jerusalem around 60 years earlier, they also found themselves desperately needing to heal from the collective trauma and shame they felt for their unfaithfulness to God, resulting in Jerusalem's destruction generations earlier.

Eli, the priest, represents the vested interests of people who are used to having their way and feel entitled to continue having their way indefinitely, which is certainly reflected in Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who were scoundrels who didn't really even pretend to be faithful. I know whenever I've felt like I was entitled to something, good chance I was more like Hophni and Phinehas than the underdog Samuel, and I know better.

Throughout scripture those like Hophni and Phinehas are typically far from God's heart, because they practice a faith that has everything to do with avoiding transformations, so they are skilled at escaping accountability. As our gospel this morning suggests, God's call is a call to "come and see" how the underdog way heals and transforms people's lives, but with willingness to do what God calls you to do. God's call to Samuel is the call of an underdog who doesn't know God at first, but with humility comes to a relationship with God that fulfills an ongoing transformative role for the Israelite community.

As a child, Samuel is someone no one ever notices. He is an example of one of those folks typically dismissed as unimportant or out of touch with the "real" world. Often, I find, these are the folks society treats harshly, but often same people who have the most to offer. They are the folks the world judges without any knowledge of their story. They are the folks people write off sometimes because they follow the underdog way. They are the people who bring about transformations that make a difference in people's lives. They may be the folks even the church makes invisible, but underdogs are rarely evacuate or retreat from God's call

because underdogs are often key in bringing about real change – even change they may never see in their lifetimes. As practitioners of the underdog way, they are exactly the people the church needs to get back to knowing itself because the church as God needs it to be plays a central role in social needs; when people won't listen to the underdog, churches decline and then die.

Over my vocational career, I've probably preached from 1 Samuel 3 more than any other passage, and heaven knows there have been more than a few times I've gone back and read it over and over when I needed a reminder of who God called me to be and what God called me to do. As God has revealed calls within my life call, God has given me a vision to reach for spiritual milestones along my underdog way. With each spiritual milestone, God has guided me through difficult choices and comforted me when the prophetic purpose made my life uncomfortable (*and believe you me ... prophetic work is anything but comfortable!*). Spiritual milestones have brought about endings and beginnings, just like God's call of Samuel suggests.

I believe God is always waiting to give people the chance to experience the underdog's way because the underdog's way is a way of healing and transformation. Heaven knows, I am no exception to that. In fact, after 27 years, I believe the underdog's way represents how the church should be, and how the church should be is vastly different than it has become – and I believe the difference is one factor that has driven people away from church.

The underdog's way embraces the Samuels and the Samanthas who are often overlooked and unseen because you learn far more when you're humble than when pride or ego are the measuring sticks of life. The underdog's way makes good use of Eli's experience –

even though Eli, Hophni and Phineas' way was done for – because Eli's experience makes it possible for Samuel to respond to God's call.

The underdog's way looks forward to those times when the ears of everyone who hear it tingle because anytime ears tingle, there's a good chance they're not only hearing God's voice but they'll find themselves driven to do whatever God instructs.

The underdog's way emphasizes the priesthood of all believers and calls the church and faith communities back to the centralized place of every community, so that loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength defines people more than sitting in your pajamas watching CBS Sunday morning, feeding capitalism's appetite for more, or going to kids' sports tournaments.

And that's only a summary of what the underdog's way looks like. The underdog's way is a place where discipleship is both learning and doing. The underdog's way isn't just about Sunday mornings but makes time every day of the week for service, study, prayer, reflection, meditation, conversation, and accountability. The underdog's way attends to the Bible study on Tuesday and the call to serve at the Senior Center or the food bank on Thursday.

Most of all, the underdog's way puts us in the temple by the ark of the covenant in the wee hours of the morning before the lamp has gone out, so we – you and I – may look for ways to intentionally invite the community we're called to serve to take part in the underdog's way.

In the name of the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one God in perfect community. Amen.