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The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

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“The word of the Lord was rare in those days.” These words open the story, a tender but troubling story, of God’s calling of the young Samuel.

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are part of the Hebrew Scriptures that lay out the story of the Kingdom of Israel. These book, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, tell the story of the Kingdom from its beginning with the conquest of Canaan by Joshua to the end that came with the Babylonian captivity and then the resettlement of the conquered land of Judea. Samuel is a bridge character in the story, the last of the Judges who ruled the land and the prophet that anointed Saul and then David as the first Kings of Israel.

Samuel’s birth was a miraculous one, a biblical sign of special things to come for him. He was born to Hannah, who was barren. She was one of the wives of Elkanah. She had been seen weeping on the steps of the Temple where Eli was priest. Eli first chided Hannah for being drunk because she appeared to be talking as she wept with no sound coming out. But when Eli understood that she was distraught and praying to God because of her inability to bear a child, he sent her on her way with the words “Go in peace, the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.”

Sure enough, soon after Hannah became pregnant with Samuel. In gratitude for her child she gave Samuel to Eli to live at the temple with him; she gave him up to God’s service. And this brings us to today’s reading, where God calls Samuel. But Samuel doesn’t recognize God’s call, because he had never heard it before, because “the word of the Lord was rare in those days.” Eli, after some confusion, finally figured out what was going on and told Samuel to obey the voice that he was hearing.

Even though there was some confusion, the call to Samuel was clear and easy to understand. We have seen a lot of this in the readings we’ve had lately, during Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. God talks to people, or sends an angel to do so. The things that are said are clear and unambiguous. “Mary, you will bear a child.” “Joseph, be good to Mary because her child is conceived by the Holy Spirit.” “Magi, follow the star, but don’t return to Herod.” All of these commands are easily understandable; the voice of God. And I’m only mentioning a few examples. The scriptures are full of them.

Wouldn’t it be nice if God gave us such clear instructions in our lives today? Even if the words weren’t exactly what we wanted to hear (which I imagine they would seldom be) at least we’d know. We would have a clear path, whether we chose to take it or not.

“The Screwtape Letters” is a book written by C. S. Lewis in 1942, when England was embroiled in the Second World War. Interestingly, the book is dedicated to J. R. R. Tolkien, who wrote “The Lord of the Rings.” In the book, Screwtape, as senior devil, is writing letters to his nephew and apprentice Wormwood, about how to win souls over to the dark side. It’s a wonderful book to read. At one point he speaks to the advantages he and his demonic minions have over “the enemy.” One such advantage is God’s unwillingness to give us clear and concise instruction. Screwtape writes: You must have often wondered why the Enemy does not make more use of His power to be sensibly present to human souls in any degree He chooses and at any moment. But you now see that the Irresistible and the Indisputable are the two weapons which the very nature of His scheme forbids Him to use. Merely to override a human will (as His felt presence in any but the faintest and most mitigated degree would certainly do) would be for Him useless. He cannot ravish. He can only woo. For His ignoble idea is to eat the cake and have it; the creatures are to be one with Him, but yet themselves; merely to cancel them, or assimilate them, will not serve…He leaves the creature to stand up on its own legs-- to carry out from the will alone duties which have lost all relish. It is during such trough periods, much more than during the peak periods, that it is growing into the sort of creature He wants it to be. Hence the prayers offered in the state of dryness are those which please Him best. We can drag our patients along by continual tempting, because we design them only for the table, and the more their will is interfered with the better. He cannot 'tempt' to [virtue] as we do to vice. He wants them to learn to walk and must therefore take away His hand; and if only the will to walk is really there He is pleased even with their stumbles. Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.

I love this. I think it says so much. And while these may not be the comfortable words we want to hear in times so wrought with uncertainty and anxiety, they are words of truth. God gives us free will because God wants us to choose relationship with God. If it were otherwise, if we couldn’t choose, we’d simply be robots or addicts, without any real capacity to choose to live and love.

We may wish that God’s call to us was as clear cut as it is in the stories we read in scripture, but what we tend to see most is that “the word of the Lord is rare in these days.” It does seem that way, but I tend to believe that it’s really not the case. God is all around us all the time, and always ours to choose.

I’m often drawn to another bit of scripture that is not always considered a “call story” but which speaks very clearly to me. It is from the prophet Micah and it is this:

“With what shall I come before the Lord,
    and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
    with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
    with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
    the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
    and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
    and to walk humbly with your God?

Amen.