

Sermon by pastor Jouko

Zion Lutheran Church, Sault Ste. Marie ON

Second Sunday after Epiphany, Jan 15,2012

1 Samuel 3:1-10 [11-20]; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

Dear friends,

The presentation of the Children's Bibles to the Sunday School children by the LCW at the beginning of this service was a very fine and commendable deed. (Thank you very much, Ladies.)

Very commendable is also the initiative that came from the Sunday School teachers, that every child attending the lessons should have their own Children's Bible, that they could use.

Interestingly, this Sunday happens to be a very appropriate day for such a presentation, because the first reading tells us today about the little boy Samuel, who was in the temple of Jerusalem and needed guidance from an adult, in this case from the high priest Eli, in understanding that God was calling him and speaking to his heart. Eli also instructed Samuel how to respond to God's call. We hope and pray that those children's Bibles as they are used under the instruction of the Sunday School teachers would also help our children to realize that our loving God and heavenly Father is speaking to their hearts through his word and calling them to a personal relationship with him in the same way as he called Samuel.

It is interesting to notice that all the readings of this day in their own way highlight the same special and unique character of our

God, that he is not some impersonal being living in his own unreachable sphere separated and distant from us and our world, as god is pictured in many other world religions, but a personal God, our heavenly Father, as Jesus taught us to call him, who as our Creator is interested in each and every one of us human beings. God, who has approached humanity in different ways during its history and is constantly approaching us and calling us to a personal relationship with him. He is the God who loved this world so much that he sent his only Son, as we read in John 3:16.

Unfortunately because of the great fall at the dawn of our human history and the brokenness we all bear deep in our being as a result, God's calling voice doesn't always reach our hearts. We so easily fail to understand that it is his voice that is speaking in our hearts through certain incidents in our lives and that the feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness of life that we sometimes feel is also his way of speaking to us, his attempts to try to make us turn to him and to listen to what he has to say and to offer us. But sometimes, due to our brokenness, even when we realize that he is speaking to our hearts, we do what the first human beings also did when God called them after they had disobeyed his commandment. We run away and try to hide from him, because we feel that God may want to punish us. We find a good example of this very "humane" attitude in today's psalm, psalm 139. In it the writer seems to experience the

presence of God in his life in a powerful way as he says: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways." But right after recognizing God's closeness in his life, in the passage that follows the writer surprisingly exclaims: "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" Something in him made him look for a hiding place from God's sight.

Isn't there something familiar in his response to God's presence in his life? At least I find it very familiar.

But as the good news of the Bible, the gospel, tells us, God is not calling us or speaking to our hearts in order to condemn us or punish us because of our brokenness but rather to invite us to a relationship with him and to receive what good things he has for us.

In John 3:17 Jesus, whom God sent into our world not only as our Redeemer but also as his messenger to reveal to us what God is like, says about this: Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

God's call to a closer relationship with him comes to us in many different ways and in many different situations of life. Samuel was just a young boy, when God called him to become his prophet.

I believe many of us also have experienced God's calling voice in our hearts when we were young, when we attended Sunday School and heard the stories from the Bible. I believe, that still some of us, as we hear those stories now, like the stories about Samuel and what Jesus taught and did during his public ministry, remember them from our Sunday school. Young hearts and minds are so open and receptive to such stories and the reality of God. But during those tumultuous years of our youth and young adulthood it often happens that the confident childlike faith that we once possessed fades away and disappears. But the good thing is that in spite of that our dear heavenly Father won't cease to care for us and to call us back to a closer relationship with him again and again. And his invitation is the same even today as Jesus once gave to Philip in the gospel reading: "Come and follow me".

Sometimes, when we pause to listen and even say yes to God's call it doesn't mean very big external changes in our lives. Internally things change, though. We become aware of his presence and his guidance in our everyday life. We also learn to know and to receive his forgiving love, especially when we realize that we have done something wrong or failed to follow his will. But sometimes it can also bring external changes to someone's life as happened to Philip and his friend Nathanael and to other Jesus' disciples when they said yes to Jesus' call to follow him. But I still believe it wasn't really difficult for them to accept those

changes, even though it meant sacrifices, even suffering for them, because they had come to realize how much more it gave to them to continue as his followers. John's gospel tells that at some point when several people were leaving Jesus because of his controversial teaching, he asked his disciples if they also wanted to go away. To this Simon Peter, who was kind of a leader among the disciples answered: 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.

I believe they felt the same way as some time later the apostle Paul, who had become a follower of Jesus after first being a persecutor of the early Christians and fully convinced that the whole talk about Jesus' rising from the dead and his being the son of God was the worst nonsense in the world. Paul writes about the big changes in his life in his letter to Philippians, chapter 3: "Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish.

What gave him such a determination and will to follow Jesus no matter what would happen? It was the powerful and surprising experience of God's love he had, that despite everything he had done as a persecutor, he was accepted by God and forgiven and found worthy to become Jesus' disciple. And so are we as well, no matter how worthy or unworthy we see ourselves in front of God.

For God so loved this world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Can we hear God calling our name and speaking to our hearts through his word and through the hymns we sing and as we come to his table and inviting us again to an even closer relationship with him, to open our hearts either the first time or again and again to his forgiving and renewing love and grace, asking him to guide and lead our lives according to his will.

If we can hear his voice, may our answer be the same as the young Samuel's: 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'
Amen.