

Message for January 17, 2021

1 Samuel 3:1-10

John 1:35-42

It was the spring of 1979 and I was on the verge of graduating from Erindale College or UTM as it is now called and unsure of what to do with my life. I had applied to teacher's college and been accepted but I really didn't want to be a teacher. I had also thought about staying on in university and getting my M.A. With that in mind I had applied to a number of grad schools, been accepted by most and had even accepted a research position at York University. But was this what I really wanted to do with my life? I wasn't sure.

My parents were aware of my uncertainty and in a casual conversation one day my father said, "Well, have you thought about becoming a minister?" My answer was a definitive 'no'. My dad then pointed out that as a kid, influenced by Bob MacMillan, the minister at Knox Oakville at the time, my ambition had been to become a minister just like him. That was true enough but that had been years ago and besides, the idea that God might want me to be a minister was laughable. So ended the conversation but the seed had been planted and it gradually took root. I started broaching the idea to various people whom I respected including the ministers at Knox at that time. Much to my surprise these people didn't find the idea laughable at all; in fact the conviction of one of those ministers that God was calling me was quite overwhelming. And so the process began that was to ultimately lead me to where I am today. I wonder though, would it have ever happened if my father hadn't casually mentioned my becoming a minister in the first place? I didn't realize it then and I am sure that my father didn't realize it either but, in hindsight and faith, I now realize that God was at work shaping, guiding and influencing. And as it was with me, so it is with all of us; that in fact is one of the messages and promises of today's two scripture passages.

It was early in the morning just before dawn. The priest who had custody of the sacred ark was an elderly man named Eli. Because of his limited eyesight he had a helper, a boy named Samuel. Since it was so early in the morning, both Samuel and Eli were still sound asleep when Samuel heard a voice calling

him. Samuel naturally assumed that his master needed something and rushed to his side. Eli's response was to tell the boy that he hadn't called him at all. Then a little while later the voice called him a second time. Once again the boy rushed over to Eli and once again was told that he wasn't needed. No doubt by this time both the old man and the boy were wondering what the other one was up to! Then it happened a third time and this time Eli caught on. Accordingly he told the boy, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you again you shall say 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening'". And sure enough a little while later Samuel heard his name being called yet again. This time though instead of rushing to Eli's side, Samuel just lay there quietly and told God that he was listening.

This then is what happened when God called Samuel, the boy who was destined to grow up and become one of the greatest prophets in Israel's history. Today's passage is often taken to be the definitive example of how God calls people to serve him. God takes the initiative and keeps on reaching out until the person so-to-speak finally sees the light and responds. This is so true and yet, as I thought about today's passage, I was even more impressed by the role that Eli played. Yes, God took the initiative in reaching out to Samuel but it was Eli who told him how to respond. Without Eli's guidance it is quite possible that Samuel might have missed his call altogether. Samuel needed someone to guide him and the same is found in today's second scripture passage as well.

It tells us about the call of some of Jesus' disciples and quite naturally the focus is on Jesus. Consider though the vital role that others played. It was John the Baptist for example who pointed at Jesus and said to two of his own disciples, "Behold, the lamb of God", thus prompting them to follow Jesus. Would they have ever even thought of following Jesus if John hadn't said anything? We may also consider what Andrew, one of those two disciples, did next. He went to his brother Simon and told him they had found the Messiah. Prompted by his brother, Simon then went to see Jesus. Jesus of course renamed him Peter and he later went on to become the greatest of all the disciples. Now would any of this have ever happened if Andrew hadn't guided his brother to Jesus?

Maybe not. When God calls people to serve him he takes the initiative but nevertheless, more often than not, God doesn't do it all himself; he works through

others. And I wonder, who has guided us as we have made our way on our spiritual journeys?

This of course is a very personal question and each one of us has our own unique answer. It may be safe to say however that first and foremost many, if not most of us, were guided by our parents. It was our parents who sought to teach us the ways of Christ. It was our parents who sought to provide us with a good example. Perhaps it was them who insisted that we attend church or Sunday School, even when we really didn't want to. And what about the Sunday School teachers and ministers; what influence did they have in guiding us on life's journey? And then of course there were also such as our school teachers, friends, neighbours and others; what role have they played?

We probably don't even realize it but all of us have been influenced, shaped and guided by other people. We would not be who we are today if it were not for them and so we owe these people a tremendous debt of gratitude. But while we have been guided by others, we ourselves have been doing the same thing too. Whether we realize it or not, we have been guiding others on their spiritual journeys.

Once again, and this is a very personal question, what influence and impact have we played in the spiritual life of other people? What Christian example have we provided to such as our children and grandchildren? What influence, good or bad, have we had on the lives of our friends, neighbours and others? Make no mistake about it, we have had an influence but have we guided people to God and his ways or away from him? What all of this means of course is that the things we say and do each and every day are important. How important? Consider this.

As we all well know we live in an ever increasingly secular world. Fewer people nowadays attend church on a regular basis, if at all. Knowledge of the Bible is shrinking since it is rarely if ever alluded to in the public school system or in society at large. Easter has little meaning to many people other than being a long weekend, and as for Christmas? For many if not most people it lost its religious significance years ago. This reminds me of a time when my children were young. A friend of one of my daughters was over and somehow the topic of Easter came up. The girl asked me if Easter was the time when Jesus was born

or when he died. I answered that it was neither since Easter is when Jesus was raised. Afterwards my daughter insisted that her friend wasn't serious and had just been kidding. Maybe she was but I was not convinced. We now live in the post-Christian era and what this means is that for many people, we are the only exposure that they ever have to Christianity and by implication, perhaps even to Jesus and God himself. The things we say and do every day proves or disproves the reality of God, Christ and his teaching. In short, we are, so-to-speak, God's walking, talking Bibles and if that doesn't make our lives important and give them purpose and meaning, then nothing ever will.

Both of today's scripture passages focus on God's call to some people to follow him. We usually focus on the main characters such as Samuel and Jesus but we should also remember the role that others such as Eli, John the Baptist and Andrew played too. They literally guided those being called to God or Christ. As we have made our spiritual pilgrimage through life, we too have been guided by others but just as we have been guided so too do we guide. But what sort of guides have we been? What sort of guides are we now? Perhaps most importantly of all, what sort of guides are we going to be?