

12.29.24 ~ Christmas 1
“Called by God before Birth!”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26 ^{NIV}

¹⁸ But Samuel was ministering before the Lord—a boy wearing a linen ephod. ¹⁹ Each year his mother made him a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice. ²⁰ Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, saying, “May the Lord give you children by this woman to take the place of the one she prayed for and gave to the Lord.” Then they would go home.

²⁶ And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people.

Leader: These Words of Dedication Are for God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Luke 2:44-52 ^{NLT}

. . . ⁴⁴ because they assumed he was among the other travelers. But when he didn’t show up that evening, they started looking for him among their relatives and friends.

⁴⁵ When they couldn’t find him, they went back to Jerusalem to search for him there. ⁴⁶ Three days later they finally discovered him in the Temple, sitting among the religious teachers, listening to them and asking questions. ⁴⁷ All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

⁴⁸ His parents didn’t know what to think. “Son,” his mother said to him, “why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been frantic, searching for you everywhere.”

⁴⁹ “But why did you need to search?” he asked. “Didn’t you know that I must be in my Father’s house?”^[a] ⁵⁰ But they didn’t understand what he meant.

⁵¹ Then he returned to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. And his mother stored all these things in her heart.

⁵² Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and all the people.

Leader: These Prophetic Men Were Each Called by God as Babies.

All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

All knowing God, we come this last Sunday of the calendar year grateful for the Christmas holidays, gifts given and received, and for the time spent in rest and play with family and friends. May our worship today be reflective of our year with you, finding beauty together in many areas of our lives. May we remember this beauty in all people, the environment, our practices, our ministries, callings, and even any difficult circumstances we may experience this next year. Help us to process the last year as we move actively into 2025, appreciating all you do. May we listen and respond to your calling as we live an Advent perspective all year, one of hope, peace, joy, and love and share it with others. Speak to us through your messenger and this message. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Merry Christmas and almost Happy New Year! Thank you again to our staff and worship leaders, the musicians, vocalists, and volunteers who all helped create a lovely Christmas Eve service! I hope those of you who were here enjoyed our time together. The music was splendid, the space full of beauty, and your fellowship was welcoming.

Our two passages (from the lectionary today) are **not** about the wise men as usual. We are in “Christmastide” the season between Christmas and Epiphany. According to Wikipedia, “in medieval era Christendom, Christmastide ‘lasted from the Nativity to the Purification.’” Some Christian cultures expand it even to forty days, ending when Jesus was presented at the Temple as a baby and Mary was purified per custom there (on 2 February). But before Luke, let’s look at another miraculous calling of the Lord in 1 Samuel. Mary’s own calling and her beautiful song/poem, what we call the Magnificat, used familiar language from Hannah’s prayer in this Old Testament book.

Let’s recall the background. Hannah had committed to the Lord that if he filled her barren womb with a son, she would dedicate his life back to the church. So, yes, she and Elkanah had a baby boy they named Samuel. After he was weaned, she took him to Shiloh for training with the priests as a lifelong Nazirite, a Jewish man who took a vow of abstinence from wine, haircuts, and touching the dead even family members. Eli and the priestly staff would look after him. He grew in stature and in favor with the Lord. Samuel’s calling was due to his mother’s fervent prayer and sacrifice for him to serve the Lord. Eli’s own sons had gone “rogue,” so he lost control of them and their behavior. God gave him a different “son” (*figuratively speaking*) to train and love, Samuel.

Samuel grew and learned the ways of the tabernacle. Each year, Hannah came to Shiloh to check on her maturing son, give him a new ephod (a priestly garment over his robe), and to care for his needs. In response, God blessed her with three sons and two daughters after her inability to have children. Both Hannah and Samuel answered God's calling to obey and surrender to his will. Like Mary, it must have been difficult for Hannah to leave her son to others.

According to Luke's Gospel, after the shepherds confirmed their witness of the Messiah and the manger in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph had Jesus circumcised on the eighth day in Bethlehem as was their custom. Then approximately thirty-three (some sources say forty) days after childbirth, Mary went back to Jerusalem to the temple for her purification ritual and to formally present Jesus to God with their meager offering (only doves because they were a poor young couple). At the temple Simeon praised God! Simeon became yet another messenger that this baby was the Messiah and would experience great pain and suffering to fulfill his salvation calling.

Then Mary and Joseph returned to Nazareth of Galilee, some 65 miles north, and this is where Jesus grew up. In our passage today, Jesus was about twelve years old. The family had gone again to Jerusalem as they did every year for the Feast of the Passover or Feast of Unleavened Bread. On the way home, they realized Jesus wasn't with them! They had to go back to search and after three days, they found him in the temple courts. Though only a tween, he was interacting with the priests and teachers, asking profound questions, listening deeply, and even teaching a little. Jesus was sorry he had frightened his earthly parents but was

insistent that this heavenly father knew where he was, what he was doing, and that he was fulfilling his calling on earth.

Like Samuel, Jesus' birth was miraculous, so both babies had been called by God to fulfill a prophecy and destiny. Yet both boys and childhoods were pretty normal, as we understand it. Samuel's boyhood was centered in the temple, but he was still a young boy with questions and although obedient, he may have occasionally questioned his purpose especially when he wasn't sure whose voice it was that was calling him! You remember that story. Jesus, too, experienced a fairly normal childhood from what we know. Even his comments to his parents in today's passage sound like most 12-year-olds today, like "duh! Didn't you know?" How many kids think their parents don't know very much?

But for us, what's even more important is that he fulfilled his calling, even as a tween. Again, although a miraculous, incarnate birth and world mission of salvation, his calling possibly was like most human ministry callings, fraught with questions, maybe denial, a little anger perhaps, bargaining, depression, and eventually acceptance. Now that's a big assumption, I realize. So, stick with my logic. These are the classic five stages of grief; we saw them a bit in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross if you think carefully about linking his birth and death before resurrection. I suggest that receiving and answering a major calling from God can be a little like grief; one must grieve the life one would not have if one answered his call. Perhaps a long life, a family, wealth, fame, safety, or whatever those life goals might be. Think about people who sign up for military service, missionaries, priests, prison service, public service, ministry, or medical fields. Long shifts, boot camp, violent

environments, responsibility for life and death, self-sacrifice, etc. A faith calling might not be that life changing for you, but it can be, and do we appreciate those who make those decisions? A calling as intense as Samuel's and Jesus' followed similar discernment paths, but their mothers and heavenly father had already chosen for them, and they accepted and were obedient.

How are you being called? Even though some of us are further along and have answered many callings in the past, what is God calling you to now? How can you accept a new calling to pass on your wisdom and faith to others? Our Christmas focus this year was on Messiah messengers—Elizabeth, John the Baptist, Mary, the angels, shepherds, wise men, Simeon, and now Jesus himself. Couldn't it also have been about Callings? Each of those people were called by God for a specific task, and Jesus opens their eyes yet again: “Don't you realize why I'm here? I was not lost for I am in my Father's house; the temple is my home, and the world will be my mission field.”

Last week we spoke of Love. Christ's calling was fulfilled by him in love. We could describe calling the same way as we described love in last week's insert: Calling “is a demanding virtue that must be nurtured and lived out in daily life with God's help. Calling cannot rely on human willpower, but it is a choice . . . that require(s) a human and spiritual cooperation.” God's word through the apostle Paul who was also called by Christ himself directs us: “Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches (1 Corinthians 7:17).” And “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have

received (Ephesians 4:1-6).” As the New Year dawns, please give your faith calling some consideration; how may God choose you to help him here on earth in 2025? Christ is with us, Emmanuel! Christ will come again in glory! Get ready for that too! Amen? Amen! ||

Let us pray. Eternal God, we thank you today and every day for your gift of beauty, hope, peace, joy, and love! We thank you for 2024 and ask you to open our hearts to answer your call for the new year in 2025. May your purpose fill our lives, our homes, and our relationships, drawing us together. Be with us New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day as we ponder next steps, celebrating Jesus’ presence. In his name, we pray, Amen.