



Turning Fifteen on the Road to Freedom is a new book by Lynda Blackmon Lowery.<sup>1</sup> Ms Lowery was the youngest person who was part of the historic march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in 1965. Interviewed about her experiences and then asked what she wanted young people to get from her story, she said that she wants young people- and I think it is equally applicable to all of us – to remember that we make history every day. The history we make may influence world events or it may simply be our own personal history. Regardless, the choices that we make, the values we espouse, the actions that we take in response to our choices and our values do matter.

Included in the choices we make are whether we are alert to the call from God to us. God calls each of us to follow. It is our choice to follow or not – but in order to make a choice about whether to follow God means that we first must be aware that God is calling us to respond to the love and the desire that God has for us to be a disciple. Our personal history will be shaped by our response.

We read earlier about the call of Samuel to move into the next phase of his ministry to the Lord. A brief reminder of who Samuel is and why he is important to Holy Scripture and our faith today:

Samuel was born to a woman barren and despondent because she was barren. We've seen this set up before: Sarah and Abraham. Rebekah, Rachel and Jacob. And we will see this later with the mother of Samson and with Elizabeth who bears John the Baptizer. God's giving of children to women formerly barren is one way to signal to the people of Israel that God is active in their world and that the child is a special gift and will have a special place in our Scripture.

Hannah, Samuel's mother, prays at the Temple and promises that if she bears a child, she will give up the child to the Temple. And that is what happened. After his birth, the child Samuel was given to be raised within and then to serve at the Temple.

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<sup>1</sup> Dial Press, 2015.

1 Sam. 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Cor. 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

Up to this point, Samuel had been ministering under Eli the priest. During the time that Samuel was studying under Eli, the voice of God had not been heard for a long time. And then, in the middle of the night, Samuel hears a call: “Samuel, Samuel.”

And, not recognizing God’s voice, Samuel runs to his mentor, Eli. “Eli, what do you need?” Eli, puzzled I’m sure, says to Samuel: “I did not call you. Go back to sleep.” And this happens a second time – and then a third. Like Moses, Ezekiel and Isaiah, we don’t often hear God when called the first time. We’re often asleep- literally or figuratively.

But the third time, Eli realizes it must be God calling Samuel. Eli instructs Samuel how to respond to God’s call: “Here I am, Lord.” Famous words – the response each of us should give when God calls.

And what God, and then Eli, asks of Samuel is a hard thing sometimes: to tell the truth even though it may be hard to hear. Eli hears that God will punish Eli and his house because Eli did not act when he knew his sons were profaning God’s temple. Perhaps this is the first test of Samuel: Listen. Tell the truth even when it is hard to hear. Tell the truth with love and compassion.

“To be called by God is an act of spiritual intimacy” according to Joseph Price.<sup>2</sup> To be called by God “means that God knows one’s name and in knowing one’s name, exercises a powerful influence on the person. To be called by God also indicates a need for immediate response because the Almighty has indeed summoned one to a specific vocation or course of action.” What that vocation is can often take a lifetime to unfold and our vocation can change course depending upon where we are and what gifts and talents we bring to God for use in the world.

Who are the ministers of the church today? Our catechism says that the ministers of the church are *first* the laity and *only then* priests, deacons and bishops. Part of what we will do next week at our Annual Meeting is to raise up leaders- three for Vestry and four to represent us at Diocesan Convention. It is right that we select from among ourselves a group to work on our behalf within and outside the walls of St. John’s. We are raising up leaders – some are people who have served this parish in leadership roles in the past and some are new or in new positions and each of whom has said “yes” to God. Whether or not you are stepping into an elected leadership role, your presence today says that you, too, have said “yes” to God. Listen carefully to the opinions of others. There is wisdom in each of you- more than you perhaps know.

Like Samuel’s life after he answered that call in the night, our lives will have ups and downs. There will be disagreements and disappointments. There will be times we are called to speak the truth with love- with care and compassion for the one to whom we are speaking when we know our thoughts, our wishes, our hopes for this parish are different. That doesn’t make them wrong. And, the elected and appointed leadership of this parish may ask you to stretch your understanding of what it means to be disciples. We may consider new programs and new opportunities that might be uncomfortable or something that we have never done before. Keep an

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Price in Feasting on the Word, Year B, volume 1. Barbara Brown Taylor and David Bartlett, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 244.

open mind. Pray for clarity and discernment about what God is asking you to be and do as we move into 2015 and beyond.

Our differing dreams for this parish work to make it stronger and more representative of the body of Christ. Legs and arms and eyes and ears are not the same – but they are each a necessary part of the whole. As Paul reminds us, the body of Christ needs each of us – after all, what would the body be if we were all ears and no mouth or perhaps more common, all mouths and no ears! Each of us – each of our gifts and talents are needed to make the complete body of Christ.

The story is told of the preacher who went about town preaching, “Put God into your life. Put God into your life!” But the rabbi of the town said, “Our task is not to put God into our lives. God is already there. Our task is simply to realize that!” God is the ground of our being. The relationship between God and creature is such that, by sheer grace, separation is not possible. God does not know how to be absent.<sup>3</sup>

While God is not absent, God’s presence can sometimes be difficult to discern amidst the hustle and bustle of daily life. Like Samuel, we need to be alert to that voice that calls to us.

What God says to us may not be as easy or clear as the directions on how to put new batteries into your newest gadget. Sometimes like those directions that are written by non-English speakers, the translation may be a bit murky. Sometimes we sometimes simply have to try and intuit what the writer wanted us to do and to know.

In the Gospel for this morning we have the famous phrase: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Our own assumptions, our past experiences, our biases and prejudices can sometimes cause us to miss God’s presence in our lives and therefore ignore an opportunity to be a disciple.

Philip’s response ought to be our response: “Come and see.” I can tell my neighbor all day long what a wonderful group of people attend St. John’s. I can tell him or her all day long about the wonderful work that we do both inside and outside the walls. But until my neighbor “comes and sees” it won’t be real to him or her – it won’t touch my neighbor deep in his or her heart and cause a turning of their life around to hear the call of God and then to act on that call. Yes, telling the story of St. John’s is important – and it is the first step. It is not the only step or the last step, however.

We have talked about this before but this is a good text to raise the point again. Most people attend a church because someone asked them to “come and see.” Don’t assume your neighbor has a church if your neighbor hasn’t mentioned where they go to church. We Episcopalians seem particularly shy about asking our neighbors or our friends or even other family members to “come and see.” Maybe St. John’s won’t be where they find a church home. Maybe they won’t find a church home at all. But the Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways and you never know when your simple “come and see” can make all the difference in the world.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2015/01/05/2-epiphany-b-2015/> (Jan. 13, 2015)

1 Sam. 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Cor. 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

As we celebrate in 2015 fifty years since the march for freedom, we are reminded of the immense changes in our society because some people, including Lynda Blackmon Lowery and others like her, followed the call to speak out and to take non-violent action, to protest injustice. “Come and see.” Come and act. Speak the truth in love.

Philip’s plea to Nathanael to “come and see” led to knowing Jesus and to becoming a disciple whose own history took a different path than it otherwise would have. “Come and see” and your own history may take a new direction as you listen for and then respond to the call of God upon your life. God calls. Are you listening? **Amen.**