

## WHAT IS MY MISSION?

I SAMUEL 3:1-20

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We are almost to the second half of the first month of 2024 and you may be asking yourself what is my mission in life or maybe just in this year 2024. What is my life supposed to be about? And a better question might be *“Who or what should give us a clue as to what that mission might be?”* Sometimes we find our motivation for living from groups, a person or cause that inspires us, or from something that happens in our world and we decide we want to do something in response. And many of those will be good causes but are they the ones that will provide an inner feeling of peace and purpose of life day in and day out?

Those questions are also some that are appropriate for congregations to ask of themselves.

I have found it interesting to read the purpose or mission statements of congregations when I happen to be in their building for various reasons. One I read recently said that they, as a congregation, *“would provide the gentle assistance you need in order to maximize your spiritual growth and to find your place of service in God’s world. We will support you when you need encouragement. We will celebrate your successes and mourn with you when you experience loss. And we do all this in an atmosphere of acceptance, warmth, unity, and appreciation of the diversity that is found in the family of God.”*

Can you guess which congregation that was? It was UBC and you can read in on the web page for our church.

Printed on the front page of every issue of The Builder are these words: *“The purpose of UBC is to show Christ’s to the local and global community through worship, fellowship and ministry.”*

I would add to that these words: *“We invite children, youth, and adults to become disciples of Jesus Christ by living fully by following the leading of the Holy Spirit and embrace God’s love for ourselves and others. We do not do these things alone.”*

I say this because in our Gospel lesson for today we notice that Jesus the Savior refuses to work alone. From the beginning he reaches out and designates others to join with him in his work. Jesus, in doing the work of the Kingdom of God, is the Great Delegator. You and I, as contemporary disciples of Jesus, are those who are delegated to work with him in his mission to the world. Think with me about that for a few moments this morning.

In our text from the Old Testament book of Samuel we find the story of the little boy Samuel, working for the priest Eli. The story begins with something we can relate to. In verse one of that lesson in I Samuel 3 you find these words: *“Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”* This served as some rationale as to why Samuel was going to have trouble hearing the Lord when he spoke. But the truth of the matter is it is a passage written for our day because many today have trouble hearing a message from God because the *“word of the Lord”* seems very rare in these days. Few people report hearing from the Lord.

But, when the Lord called out, *“Samuel! Samuel!”* Samuel went to Eli because he thought it was Eli who was calling him. He did not think to wonder if this was God calling him because people rarely heard from God. But, having this happen more than once Eli perceived it might be a word from the Lord so he told Samuel the next time he heard the call he should say, *“Speak Lord for thy servant is listening.”*

And when God spoke to Samuel he began by saying, *“I am about to do something in Israel that will*

*make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle.*" And then he then told him what was to happen to the house of Eli. You see, Samuel was delegated by the Lord to be the message boy to Eli. That was to be the beginning of a larger purpose or mission in life of Samuel.

As I said, we feel as if the Word of the Lord is not heard often around here. When we think of our mission or purpose in life in 2024 and beyond we do not think first of all about listening for a word from God.

The scriptures are full of people who heard a word from the Lord: Amos, Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jacob, Jeremiah, Joseph, Moses, Paul, Peter, King Agrippa and in the gospel lesson today we have the story of Nathaniel and he too sounds a note of uncertainty. When he is invited to be a part of what Jesus is beginning to do, he asks, in regard to Jesus, *"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"* God is always in the business of calling others to be a partner in His work.

Keep those two stories in mind as well as the mission statement I shared with you as we shift our focus first to John's Gospel where we have affirmation of the fact that Jesus comes to delegate and gives us our job description as disciples.

It begins, *"In the beginning was the Word . . ."* We read that beautiful poetry here on Christmas. You see what John is doing. He is claiming that when Christ came into the world, it was like the creation of a whole new world. John 1 is meant to be an echo of Genesis 1. Now, if you know the story of creation, as it is told in Genesis 1, then you know that no sooner has God begun creating the world than God creates humanity. And no sooner has God created humanity than God gives humanity something to do. Our story begins in Genesis, the first Book of the Bible, with God saying, *"Let us make man in our own image, and let us give him dominion over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over everything that creeps upon the earth."* So, God created humankind in his image. In the image of God, he created them, male and female, he created them. God blessed them and God said, *"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."*

You heard part of this scripture last Sunday. God is here portrayed as the divine, all-powerful king. God speaks and new worlds come into being.

And yet, in a most surprising move, God enlists the help of some of his subjects in ruling over the earth, *"in having dominion."* We sometimes speak of human beings created *"in the image of God."* This great affirmation certainly contributed to a deep sense of undeniable human worth. We—you and I—are created in the image of God.

But we also ought to be reminded of perhaps an even more radical assertion of this story. Human beings are created to be about the business of God. We don't only share God's image, but God has given us a share in God's work. God is a great delegator. We are talking about mission and purpose here.

What I'm saying here is that the same echoes from Genesis 1 that we hear in John 1, *"In the beginning was the Word"* continue as today we move deeper into the first chapter of John in today's assigned Gospel. Jesus begins his work in the world by calling disciples.

That's rather amazing when you think about it. We were just introduced to Jesus just a few verses before. Jesus has not done any preaching or teaching, no miraculous work. Before any of that, he calls everyday, ordinary people like us to work with him. There is something about Jesus that makes him reach into ordinary folks' lives and call them to do his work.

Nathanael's nasty knock of Nazareth has led generation after generation to assume that Nazareth was famous for being infamous.

Here's a surprise. Historically that just isn't so. Before Nathanael's nay-saying there was nary a word recorded one way or the other about the town of Nazareth. It was what it was, a small, dusty, insignificant village of stone homes struggling to stay solvent. Nazareth was unremarkable,

undistinguished, unconsidered. It wasn't remarkable for being unremarkable. It was what it was.

That is, until John's gospel recorded Nathanael's dismissal of a "no-good Nazarene." From the viewpoint of the twenty-first century, we can never properly see Nazareth. Our vision will forever be squeezed and squinted through Nathanael's dismissal.

So why did John feel it was so important to preserve this rotten reputation for poor old Nazareth? What does a bad rep for Jesus' "hometown" offer us?

Think of this as the gospel writer's offer of verbal intensive care to a world that needs a Savior who is accessible to all, even those in Nazareth.

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" It speaks to all of us because we all feel like we are from Nazareth. The best evidence that proves America is not yet quite a cleanly classless society is our across-the-board conviction that we are all born "on the wrong side of the tracks."

For some of us those "tracks" are made of money. We were born genuinely poor.

For some of us those "tracks" are made of social ties. We are not socially "acceptable" somehow — we have allowed ourselves to be labeled as too slow, too sad, too different, too wimpy, or too moody.

For some of us those "tracks" are physical — we have come to conclude that we are the wrong size, too large, too skinny, too ugly, too beautiful, too smart, or less so, too handicapped—we could go on and on.

In our souls we are all coming out of our own "Nazareth."

Nathanael's question, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth" can be phrased another way in 2024. If we watch national media today we all know that the "beautiful people" are those from New York or California or maybe Vegas. They are the stars the athletes with unreasonable salaries or the popular singers or the politicians who are famous for many and various reasons. Not people from Carbondale or to saying nothing of places like Cypress.

It was several years ago when John Davis was the principal of the little Cypress Elementary School where I started my education. He invited me to come and give a graduation address to the students and parents. In my talk with them I suppose I wanted them to know that regardless of the fact that they were from Nazareth—Cypress I mean—they were as important to the world they lived in as anyone else. God had a mission and purpose for them and they needed to keep that in mind.

Of course, there are many other Nazareth's we might think of:

"Can anything good come out of my depleted pension, my pink slip, my spouse's death, my child's health struggles, yes even the Gaza mess?"

It is in these "worst of times" in the "worst places" of our life, that God's presence pours in. Just when you think everything is coming to an end, everything is really just beginning—and not only that but that is the same time we are called by God to share in his creative purposes.

God is calling us to be a part of his mission of bringing good news and a purpose for all who we encounter.

Working "out of Nazareth" is always a hazardous commute. When God "is up to something" in your life, there are two things you can count on. Martin Luther described it perfectly — "Where God builds a church, the Devil builds a chapel." Evil is active and will gladly move in to add more chaos to our crisis.

But the second certainty we can cling to is that God will do God's greatest work in the worst of places. God does God's greatest work in the worst of times, in the least of God's people. God does God's greatest work in the worst part of you. In that deepest, darkest hole in your soul, that is where God will send the deepest roots of redemption and forgiveness and then a job description. To invite others to "come and see."

Come and see what God is up to in bringing into being a new creation.

This weekend we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr's Birthday. In 1963 it seemed that our country was going in the wrong direction in so many ways. Sunday School children were killed in bomb attacks on the churches they studied in. People were still being lynched on a regular basis because of their color. Dr. King was arrested many times because he spoke of something better for all of us. He wrote his letter from the Birmingham jail. The letter from Birmingham jail is a powerful response by Martin Luther King Jr. to eight white clergymen who criticized his methods of nonviolent protest and his presence in Birmingham<sup>123</sup>. King defends his actions and explains the urgency of the civil rights movement and the indispensability of nonviolent resistance in addressing segregation and discrimination<sup>24</sup>. The letter is an important document in the civil rights movement and American history<sup>34</sup>. That letter came from Nazareth.

We all come "out of Nazareth." Even the beautiful people of this world—the sports stars, Hollywood's finest, political folk, the billionaires of this world-- find their lives collapsing quite often and in those moments in their lives God is willing to call them to a mission and purpose that is a part of what He is about in this world.

"Out of Nazareth" God comes to bless others and this world and to that end Christ chooses to send us on His mission. And our mission today is to share the story of our faith and to be about the business of being Christ in the world.

That letter from the Birmingham Jail help give birth to the powerful vision God gave Dr. King of a better world—his dream was similar the dream/vision Isaiah saw.

*I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.*

*I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.*

*I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.*

*I have a dream that one day down in Alabama with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, one day right down in Alabama little Black boys and Black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.* (By the way part of that dream became real on the day when integration was enforced by National Guard Soldiers in Alabama. After she came home after that first day of school a little white girl was asked by a reporter how things went. The reporter got a different answer than expected when the little girl said they were all scared. We were so scared that me and a little black girl held hands all day long. This was not the answer the reporter was looking for.)

Dr. King concluded his dream by saying, *I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.*

What kind of vision or purpose has God given you. You may remember that Rick Warren wrote a book entitled The Purpose Driven Life. He said that all us have a purpose given by God. Are you engaged in the purpose God has for you and if not, why not?

My friends, God is still in the business of speaking to his people—what he longs for is for his people to listen. What might God be saying to you today about your purpose?