

Rev. Dr. Martha Jacobs
Can We Continue to be Amazed?
Psalm 111, Gospel of Mark 1: 21-28
January 28, 2024

The last two weeks we've talked about God calling us, God calling Samuel, and God calling Jesus and the first four disciples. We looked at how God calls people differently, and how God calls each one of us to work together to care for others and ourselves. Why do we answer the call on our hearts? Perhaps our two readings for today can help us to at least begin to answer that question. This morning, I am going to spend a few minutes on the gospel reading, but then I want to switch over to Psalm 111. During our Healings of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark series last fall, we spent time on the healing part of this gospel reading. Today, I want to spend time on the word "authority" and what that means and why it was that people were amazed that Jesus spoke with authority, which is different from how the scribes spoke about the Scriptures.

The scribes were members of a learned class in ancient Israel that studied the Scriptures. They had knowledge of the law and could draft legal documents like contracts for marriage, divorce, and the sale of land. Many scribes devoted themselves to preserving and copying Israel's sacred literature onto parchment scrolls which we know as the Torah.

As our scripture today indicates, on the Sabbath, Jesus enters the Synagogue and begins teaching. Mark tells us that the people who heard him teach were astonished, "for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." The ancient Greek word for authority is *exousia*, which is related to the verb *exesti*, which means, "it is free" or "it is permitted." *Exousia* is defined as "sovereign freedom" of one who acts without hindrance. [1] Jesus's teaching with sovereign freedom is contrasted with the teaching of the scribes. The difference is that the scribes' teaching depends on their knowledge of and adherence to the traditions of the time – especially the traditional interpretation of the Torah. However, Jesus teaches with an independent authority, based on the authority of God. Whereas the scribes are bound to tradition, Jesus is relatively free – free in the way that only Jesus could be – since he is connected to and understands God's authority and how God wants God's people treated.

That explains why people were astonished at Jesus's authority to understand and talk about God's words. Even though we are not told what it was he taught that day, we know that he taught in a way that was different from anyone they had ever heard who was trying to interpret the Torah. Jesus was teaching them something new – the scribes had basically said the same thing about the same scripture each time it was read. But, with Jesus, who had the inside track, what he was beginning to teach them was new. As we know from his ministry, he was teaching them how to put the people before the law.

Jesus's teaching with authority, brought the people a kind of freedom and it brought them health and healing. His authority attracted people not through manipulation but

through who he was and the attention that was being paid to those who were thought to be less than. As we learn throughout the gospels, when Jesus puts people before the law, this is a very different concept of power and authority in his time. It is also a different concept of power and authority in our time. We know what it would be like if people were put before politics today, in the way that Jesus taught us. Perhaps, that is one reason Jesus put the call on our hearts – to make a difference in our own lifetimes, in whatever way we are able.

I want to turn now to Psalm 111, which really helps us to understand God's identity and may shed some light on our reading from the Gospel as well. Psalm 111 is an Orientation Psalm which we learned about last summer. Orientation Psalms are psalms written when the world is wonderful, things look great. People are happy. Life seems to be good. Well, some of us are really worried about so many things happening in our world right, so talking about Psalms of Orientation might not be what we would like. However, Psalms of Orientation also remind us of what's important and remind us that there is a basis for feeling secure despite what is happening in our world. So, Psalm 111 enables us to see who God is and how God acts in the world, according to this particular psalmist and his belief that God is in everything and over everything and through everything. This psalm reflects Israel's understanding of God's capacity to honor God's covenant with God's people. It is a good basis for reminding us of our call.

As a reminder, biblical expressions of the heart are not how we see the heart. In Biblical times, the heart was seen as the place where emotions, spirituality, morality and intellect resided. Today, we see the heart as the place where emotions come from and the head is where our intellect resides. So, when the psalmist gives God thanks with his whole heart, he is speaking not just of his emotions, but of his intellect and his intentions.

The psalmist is evoking memories of the Lord's deliverance in Israel's past as well as God's covenant with the people. By helping the people to recall the past and God's being with the people in the past and working miracles through them, like parting the Red Sea and providing manna in the wilderness, the psalmist is also helping them to know and remember that God is present now, too. By emphasizing the permanence of the Lord's works, using phrases like "Endures forever" God is "ever mindful" God's works are "established forever and ever" and that God has "commanded his covenant forever" reminds us as well of God's presence in our lives and our world right now.

As I thought more about this, I realized that that is why, from time to time, I remind us of what we have done. In my message in our Annual Report, I included some of the amazing things we have accomplished over the past 10 years. I was not aware that what I was doing was similar to the psalmist and I have done that in sermons as well. I too am reminding us of how God has worked through us and continues to work through us to accomplish amazing things.

For example, through your contributions to our Deacon's Fund and my discretionary fund alone, we have helped people to the tune of more than \$90,000 in the past 10

years. We have donated more than 16,400 lbs of food to the Food Pantry. We have collected more than 300 lbs of mittens, pj's, scarves and the like from our Mitten tree. Our firewood ministry, with thanks to Paul, Chase and Liam and Thomas, has contributed more than \$15k to our benevolences. Our weekly plate offerings have brought in more than \$31,700. While I am not bragging about these amazing accomplishments, and there are many more that I have not included this morning, I am amazed and joyous that we have been able to help so many people in just 10 years. In tougher times, it is important to look back and remind ourselves of what we have done.

The psalmist helps to remind us that the permanence of God's works was established thousands of years ago, and continues today. That is the kind of authority that we follow. The kind that teaches us, and all with whom we come into contact, that we are working through the words that Jesus spoke in that synagogue in Capernaum. Words and actions that remind us that people come before politics, before power. Our call to serve our still-speaking God comes out of a love for people, all people and our willingness to put the needs of others before our own or at least parallel to our own. Sometimes, we forget that the small things we do can and do make a difference in the life of someone, both those we know and those we don't know.

Recently, there was an article in the NY Times by Anna Kodé, entitled *Stop Ignoring All the Mundane Miracles in Your Life*. She suggests that we need to stop looking at our phones and start watching the world around us. She has taken on a discipline of journaling for 15 minutes a day while sitting in a coffee shop, a park, a train, any place where she can watch people interact.

She writes: "Phones, with their ability to transport you to other worlds, want to convince you that the one you're stuck in doesn't have anything worth paying attention to. But through my journaling, I realized something: We're shoulder to shoulder with many universes; countless lives, hopes, dreams and fears as complicated as our own, all clustered in the same crowded shops, train cars and sidewalks. Why ignore all that?"

As she reminded me, when we notice the mundane, we see the miracles in the everydayness of our lives. The psalmists were writing about their world and how it impacted them in the everydayness of their lives. They believed that everything that happened was caused by God – both the good and the not so good. Whether we believe that or not, there are miracles all around us if we but open our eyes to see them. It is a miracle that we were able to disperse almost \$100k to help those in need in 10 years. It is a miracle that we learned about and supported a school in Nyaka. It is a miracle that our kids understood the importance of supporting those who were dying as they chose to raise funds for Hospice of Westchester at the height of the pandemic. It is a miracle that this Church has continued to be here for more than 100 years. It is a miracle that each one of us has found our way across that threshold or through the internet, to find this caring and loving community that seeks to reach beyond our doors to help others and not just care for ourselves.

Seeing who God is and how God acts in our world ties these two readings together and gives us a framework for how we need to be in our world and how we need to continue the covenant God had with the psalmists, with Jesus, with the disciples and has with us. We are to continue our call to care for others while we also continue to be here for each other – reminding each other that God was, is and will be among us, reminding us to look around and know, deep within our beings, that God is also within each one of us.

God will continue to be faithful to us. Let us recommit ourselves to be faithful to God and to serving those most in need. When we then take the time to reflect on and to look back, we too can and should be amazed at what seemingly mundane miracles God has done through each and every one of us. Hopefully, when realizing that, we can continue to be amazed at what God has done and will continue to do through each one of us. God has been faithful to us. Let us continue to be faithful to God.

[1] Stephen Hultgren <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-mark-121-28-2>

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Rev. Dr. Martha Jacobs

Is it I, Lord?

1 Samuel 3:1-20

January 21, 2024

This is the second call story in as many weeks. Last Sunday, we heard the story of Jesus calling his first four disciples. They were fishermen, and Jesus is walking along the Galilee and calls them. Mark's Gospel tells us that they immediately drop what they are doing and follow him. This week, we have Samuel's call story. Remember, this is Epiphany, and God is on the move doing new things and inviting us to see them in a new way. So, today, we hear a different kind of call story that has a history behind it.

Having these call stories back to back, reminds us that God calls us in different ways and through different means. That is important, because we need to remember that God calls each of us in the way that we can hear God. These two stories remind us of that, which is especially important as we move into our future as a Church. "Is it I, Lord?" is bit of a provocative sermon title because it is easy to think that God is not calling you – God must be calling someone else. And, that is where we, as a Church family help each other. But, I am getting ahead of myself. Let me go back to Samuel and Eli before I make you too uncomfortable! I want to give you their backstory, their relationship to God, and what was happening in their world.

Some of you may remember the story of Hannah, who was taunted by her husband's other wife for not being able to give him any children. Hannah desperately wanted a child, which would then raise her status in her community. She wanted one so badly, that she promised him to God, if God opened her womb and gave her a child. God did so and she names him Samuel, which means, "God has heard." To keep her promise, Hannah brought Samuel to the Temple after he had been weaned.

He became an apprentice to Eli, the Chief Priest. Samuel eventually becomes Eli's companion and helps him with his day-to-day chores in the Temple, because Eli's eyesight has grown dim. Samuel sleeps in the Temple near the ark of God – the most sacred object in Israelite worship. The image of Eli, who cannot see, versus Samuel, who has yet to see and comprehend, and yet sleeps by the ark, sounds like he is being set up to answer a call from God.

When he was about twelve years of age, God called Samuel, who, up to this point, had no direct relationship with God. Samuel does not respond to a person calling to him, as the disciples respond to Jesus. In this call story, more work has to be done to get the attention of the young one who is being called. Imagine being awakened by hearing your name called. Three times Samuel gets up only to be told by Eli that he had not called him. It is only when Eli realizes that it must be God calling Samuel, that we too begin to understand what is happening.

It may seem a bit surprising that God would put a call on Samuel's heart since he had never had a direct relationship with God. However, if you look at the history and how Samuel came into being, it would appear that even though Hannah didn't know it, God was using her. Through Hannah, God brought about the person who would be the catalyst to move the people from priestly authority to prophetic authority. God will no

longer speak through Priests. Rather, God has decided to start speaking through Prophets – why?

Well, if you look at the words God gave Samuel to speak to Eli, you can see that the priestly line had taken a turn away from God and instead were enriching themselves. Eli's sons, who were in line to become Chief Priests, had chosen to take the choicest parts of the sacrifices that people brought for God, to eat themselves. This was an affront to God as well as to those who had brought sacrifices that were intended for God. That is one of the main reasons why God had been silent for so long – that is why "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."

The Priestly clan, who had been given the gift of tending to the Temple and the sacrifices that were to be made, had taken the choicest parts for themselves. And, even though Eli had tried to stop his sons, he had not succeeded. They had ignored him. I think that Eli knew that God was not pleased and hard times would eventually befall his family. He felt helpless because he could not change their actions.

And, yet, God still uses Eli to help Samuel hear his call to serve God. Despite knowing that his sons had broken God's covenant with the priestly line, Eli is still attentive to God's voice and helps Samuel to know that it is God who is calling him.

As we heard, it took Samuel hearing God calling him three times and Eli telling him it must be God in order for him to begin to understand and to answer – "here I am, God." God then sort of tests Samuel by telling him awful things that will happen to Eli and his family. When Eli asks what God has told Samuel, Samuel hesitates. But, Eli admonishes him to tell the truth and so he does, even though it will hurt the person who had raised him and taught him. And, what does Eli do, when hearing those awful words from God? He still blesses God. He knows that his time and the time of the priestly clan is ending. He can do nothing about it and yet he remains connected to God.

Eli's sons are of the priestly line. Samuel's parents, Hannah and Elkanah, are faithful people, but they are not from a lineage that mattered in those days. Because Eli's sons have not served the Lord in an appropriate manner, God turns to an outsider, to Samuel. This is similar to the way God turned to other outsiders like Moses and Jacob, and Joseph, and David. And, as we discussed last week, God also turned to outsiders like Jesus and the disciples he called to learn from him.

So, once Samuel understands that God has called him and has used him to deliver the news to Eli, our story says that "Samuel grew up and the Lord was with him and God let not fall to the ground any of his words." What an odd saying – "let not fall to the ground any of his words." Robert Alter comments on his translation saying: "God did not allow any of Samuel's words to go awry but fulfilled all of his prophet's predictions. From Dan to Bersheba – from the far north near Phoenician territory to the Negeb in the South, Samuel's authority as prophet was recognized by all of the Israelite tribes. [Dr. Alter emphasizes that] Instead of being withheld, divine communication is now regular and repeated through the person of Samuel."

As we know, that divine communication continued through Jesus and the disciples and down through the centuries to us. We may try to carry on with "business as usual" but,

when we are open to it, God intervenes in our lives, just as God intervened in Samuel's life and in the lives of the disciples. We can try to deny it, but God does not readily take "no" for an answer.

God's call comes when we least expect it and often to those we least expect to be called. God is always the God of surprises. We may not think ourselves worthy, but God calls us out of our humanity, not out of our perfection. That may be the hardest part of accepting that you are called to serve. It was for me. As I have said from this pulpit before, my call was a shock to me because I knew I was not perfect and I knew I would have a very hard time accepting that God could use me. When I told a good friend that I was thinking of going to seminary, but I didn't know why, she said to me, "Oh Lord, honey, you've been called." It was only then that it began to sink into my heart, and it scared me since I knew it was not going to be easy.

Even today, there are times when I wonder, all these years later, why me? Why did God call me? How could I possibly walk with people through some of the most difficult times of their lives? How could I possibly celebrate others most wonderful moments? Why would anyone want to listen to whatever wisdom or insight God might place on my heart? It is out of those places in my heart that were most wounded and most broken that I was able to walk with people in their pain. It is out of those places in my heart that are the healthiest and most fulfilled that I can celebrate with joy someone else's joy. Why me?

This morning, I am wondering, after hearing about how God called the disciples and Samuel, if you are wondering to yourself, is God calling me? Or, wondering if I am telling you that I believe God is calling you.

Well, I can tell you beyond doubt, that God has called each one of us out of our complete humanity to serve and help others. We may not feel that we are worthy or have anything to offer, but believe me, God is using you already in ways you may not even realize. Out of the hope in God's love and resurrection and acceptance of each one of us for all that we are, God has called each of us to serve. We all have different talents and abilities – God-given talents and abilities that are ripe for sowing and for growing. So, as this Church takes its next steps, how will you step up to answer God's call upon your heart?

There are so many voices competing for our attention. I invite you to pause and listen. God is calling you. You may not recognize it or want to believe it, but God is calling you to serve here at FCC. You may not think you are at the top of God's list, but I can assure you that God does not hold grudges. God calls us to help each other and to speak God's words with love, with compassion and with an openness to hearing anew what God is asking us to do. So, in this time of change and growth, when you hear or feel that voice calling your name anew, how will you respond? I pray that, like Samuel, you will say, "Here I am, Lord. Speak, for Your servant is listening."

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Rev. Dr. Martha Jacobs
What's So Compelling?
Psalm 62:5-12, The Gospel of Mark 1:14-20
January 14, 2024

What's so compelling about our faith that it brings us to this time and place on a Sunday morning? What is it that we feel that makes us want to do things for others, thinking of them first, sometimes before we even think about how it will affect us?

Why did I leave a secular career for one that is sacred? Why did you choose to say "yes" when asked if you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior? Was there something compelling about that call upon your heart?

These questions are as old as our religious tradition. They go back to our story today, of why four men, who were doing their jobs as fishermen, helping their families support themselves, choose to answer Jesus's call to come and follow him? There was something compelling for these fishermen too, but we don't know what it was. But, there was something inside of them, just as there is something inside of us, that led us to turn another way, and follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Jesus started his ministry preaching the good news about God. As if to show how that can impact our lives, Mark tells us that he calls four men, four outsiders, who respond immediately.

While Matthew has his mysterious start with the magi and Luke tells us of the drama surrounding the birth and appearance of Jesus, Mark tells us that Jesus simply appeared from out of nowhere, is baptized by John, then immediately goes into the desert to be tempted. Then, as our reading for today indicates, he appears in Galilee, walking along the shoreline. He appears as a humble person called by God to bring God's good news. We sometimes forget that the people of that time don't know what we know – we know who Jesus is, but they have yet to discover who and whose he is and why he is there.

Jesus was an outsider who called outsiders. The first disciples were "northerners" – from the northern province of Galilee. The capital of Israel was Jerusalem, which was in the southern part of the kingdom. The Temple, which was in Jerusalem, was the religious center. Pilgrimages to the Temple in the Southern part of Israel, brought people from all over for certain yearly festivals and holidays.

So, no wonder Jesus and his disciples were greeted with skepticism and treated as outsiders. The religious leaders would have seen someone coming from the north as being perhaps a bit backwards, because they did not come from the hub of religious life in Jerusalem. When you are not from the right place, sometimes that follows you wherever you go – that was definitely the case with Jesus and his disciples.

Additionally, the disciples Jesus chose were not selected based on their knowledge or practice of Jewish laws. And, as we know, they certainly were not perfect – but then neither are we. God called them, and God has called us. Yes, you too are called – not just me. God's call is not limited to clergy. As a UCC church, we know that all are called to serve in the various parts of our church where the worshipful work of our church is

done. That work is done by members and friends of FCC who step up. We feel a call in our heart and feel compelled to make a difference, not just for us, but for all of those whom we serve both near and far.

By now, you have probably realized that God's call is not finite; there is no end to it. God's call is to an unknown future – we never know where that call will lead us. But, not knowing does not mean that we can ignore that call. The anticipation of wondering what God has in store for those who serve alongside God, can be daunting. We are sometimes caught off-guard, as I think those first disciples were. It seems that they didn't stop to think about the consequences of leaving their fishing boats. Mark indicates that in both situations, the men immediately got up and followed Jesus. They felt compelled.

Sometimes, as I think Mark was doing, it is good to go back to the basics, back to the beginning and listen anew for what God is wanting us to hear. We do that kind of hearing with our heart, not with our mind. That is what the first disciples did – they listened with their heart. This leads me to wonder, what is it like for you to listen with your heart to what God is calling you to do? For me, at this time in my life, I know that God is calling me to a different pace and time with God.

And, I know, with every fiber of my being, that God is calling this Congregation to continue to do amazing things – welcoming all – being open to difference and welcoming it. As it has for the past 100+ years, this call continues to rely on trust and hope that moves this Congregation forward into an active and committed response, which will continue with your next pastor. God is still at work, still proclaiming the good news and God is still calling us to follow Jesus. Can you hear that invitation? Can you be open to a new and scary time, that will have you surrounded by God's Holy Spirit, guiding and lifting you up?

We are in the ecclesiastical time of Epiphany. This time reminds us that the Holy Spirit breaks into our lives and into our world when we least expect it. Epiphany affords us the time to stop and look around, knowing that God is on the move as we move beyond Christmas and into the work that Jesus has on his agenda. That work includes us.

God is continuing to work through all of us to care for and bless God's world and God's people. God continues to show up where we least expect God to be. As we know, the promise of the Gospel is not that hardship will be taken away, but that God is in that "Light that shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." We heard that during Christmas time and it remain true. The Gospel provides us with sustaining and courageous hope. We heard that through the voices of our youth who helped us tell our Christmas Eve story and we heard it and will continue to hear it through them with our Bible Stories Live! presentations.

We also heard it through a young African-American man who answered God's call on his heart to speak out against injustices. And, we heard it through the woman who decided not to move from the seat on the bus that she took because Rosa Parks was tired of being considered less than. These and so many more people have answered God's call and listened to that voice deep within them that compelled them to step up and help others.

Dr. Martin Luther King voiced that so clearly. Knowing he was going against all that surrounded him, he also knew that God was with him and would lead him and all of the people who have fought for and sought equality for all people. Dr. King knew God was going to lead them into a courageous hope-filled future. Even if he did not know all that would happen, Dr. King knew that God would be in the middle of what happened. He was compelled to answer God's call on his heart.

So, knowing that you answered God's call on your heart, why did you choose FCC to be your faith home? What compelled you to say "yes" to joining this Church? We have seen God at work in our midst as people have been compelled to step up over the years to help others – from cooking for and caring for our Emergency Shelter Partnership guests, to supporting our youth as they learned what it means to serve, to providing for people who have come to our country in search of a renewed life. Through working with ReSet and Temple Beth El, we have made a difference for several families and will continue to do so.

We have seen God at work through our standing up against hatred in all of its forms by passing an Open and Affirming statement that not only supports those who are of different social means or ethnic or cultural background or skin color but those who are LBGTQIA. We have and will continue to support youth by learning more about what it means to be who they are and hear their struggles and support them through their struggles.

We have seen God compelling us through welcoming our Muslim friends and our Lutheran friends who needed places to worship. We have seen God at work through providing a pre-school that has the flexibility that parents need and a scholarship opportunity through the Mattias Edstrom Scholarship Fund. We have seen God at work through being environmentally aware by offering firewood from trees that had to be cut down. We have seen God at work through our financially giving more than \$11,000 a year to organizations outside of FCC who are doing work for those in the wider world who we individually can't support, but, to whom we can provide funding, so that they can continue to do the work that God has called them to do.

We have done so many compelling spirit-led things over the years and we have so much more we can do. So, when God tugs at your heart again, what will you do with that nudge or that urge or that strong desire to help others? God continues to show up where we least expect to find God. God has in store for us things we have yet to imagine. God's word and work is still changing lives and changing our world, through each one of us. Together we are a powerful and spirit-filled community who can do far more than we even know.

Let us not be demure when God puts that call on our hearts. When God comes by when you least expect God to do so, I pray that you will feel compelled, as those first disciples felt, to answer that call and move forward with an open heart and open hands, ready to do the surprising work God has called us to do.