

Sunday 17 January 2021 - Circuit service (Jenny Dowding)

Welcome to worship wherever you are. We worship with all God's people everywhere!

Call to worship:

Young or old, slow or fast;
tall or small, know-it-alls or eager learners:
God has called and welcomed each of us.

Wrinkled, white-haired, stooped with age;
bright-eyed, smooth skinned, leapers of two steps at a time:
Each of us is made in God's image.

Parents working from home, kids learning remotely,
essential workers keeping us safe, retirees shielding in isolation:
God works through each of us.

StF 28 - Jesus calls us here to meet him (verses 1, 2, 3) <https://vimeo.com/449070174>
(or H&P 141 - Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult)

Jesus calls us here to meet him as, through word and song and prayer,
we affirm God's promised presence where his people live and care.
Praise the God who keeps his promise; praise the Son who calls us friends;
praise the Spirit who, among us, to our hopes and fears attends.

Jesus calls us to confess him Word of life and Lord of all,
sharer of our flesh and frailness, saving all who fail or fall.
Tell his holy human story; tell his tales that all may hear;
tell the world that Christ in glory came to earth to meet us here.

Jesus calls us to each other: vastly different though we are;
race and colour, class and gender neither limit nor debar,
Join the hand of friend and stranger; join the hands of age and youth;
join the faithful and the doubter in their common search for truth.

John L. Bell (b.1949) and Graham Maule (b. 1958)

We're going to read a beautiful psalm which reminds us of the depth of God's knowledge of us, and how we can never escape his love and care. Then we will continue to reflect on this amazing truth in the following prayer and hymn.

Psalm 139: 1-6; 13-18 (StF 835)

¹O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.

³You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.

⁵You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

¹⁷How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

¹⁸I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

Prayer and Lord's Prayer

(adapted from a prayer by Thom Shuman)

God, who calls us,
it doesn't matter
how far we go to run from you,
you reach out and touch us
with healing in your hands,
and turn us around
so we can follow you home.

God who invites us to follow,
it doesn't matter how suspicious we are of you,
you remove our fears with your compassion,
you take away our doubts,
with complete acceptance of who we are.

God who speaks to us,
it doesn't matter
how often we ignore your words,
you whisper to us
until our ears
tingle with anticipation
and we listen with eager hope.

God who knows and loves each one of us,
continue to call us by name,
even as we pray in the name
of the One who has taught us to say,
Our Father . . .

The next hymn, 'O God, you search me and you know me', is based on the lovely Psalm 139, which we heard earlier. It reminds us that God knows us and loves us intimately, and holds us safe wherever we are. For copyright reasons, we are not permitted to reproduce the words here, so, for those without access to a copy of *Singing the Faith*, an alternative hymn and video link is also given.

StF 728 - O God, you search me and you know me

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JPGY1w-674> (no words on screen, but a lovely version)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLjYhny5A> (only has 4 verses)

Alternative hymn:

StF 139 – Today I awake

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uAGtJi00KE> (lively version conducted by John Bell the composer)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Prs9ZoACHeY> (a slower version if you prefer!)

Today I awake and God is before me.
At night, as I dreamt, he summoned the day;
for God never sleeps but patterns the morning
with slithers of gold or glory in grey.

Today I arise and Christ is beside me.
He walked through the dark to scatter new light.
Yes, Christ is alive, and beckons his people
to hope and to heal, resist and invite.

Today I affirm the Spirit within me
at worship and work, in struggle and rest.
The Spirit inspires all life which is changing
from fearing to faith, from broken to blest.

Today I enjoy the Trinity round me,
above and beneath, before and behind;
the Maker, the Son, the Spirit together –
they called me to life and call me their friend.

Children's slot – Made of Stardust (also on video)

Only try this with an adult's help!

If you light a candle and hold a saucer above it (not too close!), you will soon notice black powder appearing on the saucer. Do you know what this is?

You probably know it is carbon.

Holding the saucer over the flame prevented all the carbon from burning, and formed a thin layer on the saucer. This is stardust!

When a star comes to the end of its lifecycle, it throws out carbon, one of the essential building blocks of the universe. When God made human beings out of the "dust of the earth" as the Bible says, he used the same material that made the stars, and planets, and everything we see in the starry night sky! We are made of stardust!

This is amazing, isn't it! Even more amazing is to think that God promises we shall still be alive long after our own sun has died. Jesus promised this: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3: 16 NRSV)

"Eternal life" – that doesn't mean just existing forever like a speck of stardust. It means the *real you* will outlast the stars, in a life beyond our imagination.

This promise from God is because of *love*. God made every atom of you, and knows everything there is to know about every one of us.

But that's not scary, because God *loves* each one of us, just as we are.

May you discover more and more about the God who made everything, and made you, and loves you forever.

Readings

The appointed readings from the Old Testament, and from the gospels, are both about people being called by God. As you listen, notice any similarities in the two stories.

1 Samuel 3: 1-20

John 1:43-51

1 Samuel 3: 1-20

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. ²At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. ⁴Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. ⁶The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for

you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. ⁹Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. ¹⁰Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

¹¹Then the Lord said to Samuel, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. ¹²On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. ¹⁴Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.” ¹⁵Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. ¹⁶But Eli called Samuel and said, “Samuel, my son.” He said, “Here I am.” ¹⁷Eli said, “What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.” ¹⁸So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, “It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.”

¹⁹As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

²⁰And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

John 1:43-51

⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.”

⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” ⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”

⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” ⁵⁰Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Sermon – God Calling

Unconscious Bias

A couple of weeks ago, some of the circuit staff attended an online training course about “Unconscious bias.”

This refers to the way all of us *unconsciously* develop biases against particular groups of people without realizing it. Unconscious bias happens outside our conscious awareness, and is a learned stereotype that’s automatic and mostly unintentional. Everyone has unconscious biases about various groups, and they are often not representative of our conscious values.

There’s something of unconscious bias, I think, in the two stories we’ve just read.

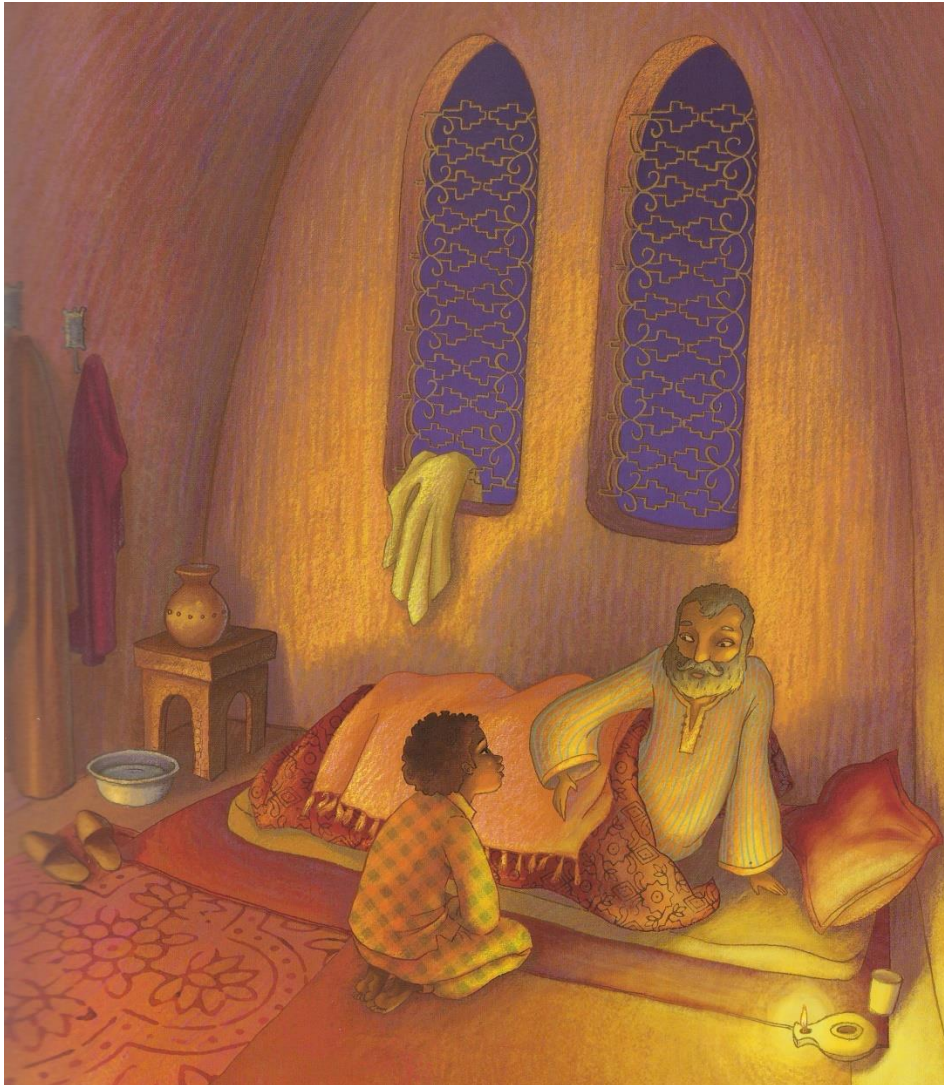
It takes the old priest Eli quite a while for it to occur to him that God is speaking to *Samuel*. After all, he’s only a boy!

God doesn’t call *children* to deliver important messages to God’s people!

Then there’s Nathanael. Invited by Philip to come and see the man he believes is the fulfillment of the prophets’ promise, Nathanael retorts, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Does God call *young* people to prophesy to God’s people?

Can anything good come from a *nowhere town*?



These stories are about God's call to individuals. They are quite different callings in many ways, but one thing they have in common is that, in each case, there is another person involved. In the first story, God speaks directly to Samuel, but the priest Eli has an important role. In the second story, it's Philip who brings Nathanael to meet Jesus, who then calls Nathanael to follow him.

Eli and Samuel - age and youth

Firstly, we explore the story of Samuel's call.

God spoke to God's people in an unexpected way – not to the experienced and educated priest Eli, but to the young boy, Samuel.

We're told that "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."
(1 Samuel 3: 1)

You may remember that Samuel had been an answer to prayer for his childless mother Hannah, and in thankfulness to God, she dedicated him to God's service. So the boy was living at the house of God with the elderly priest Eli.

God speaks to Samuel in the night, and he goes to Eli three times, believing that the old man is calling to him. Eventually Eli realises that it is the Lord, and instructs Samuel in how to respond. As a result Samuel has to deliver a message of painful judgement from God.

I wonder if you identify with either of the people in this story?
Maybe you're like Samuel – young in age, or new to faith.

You're not expecting God to speak to *you* about the future of God's people. You don't know how you would recognise God's voice anyway.

Perhaps you're more like Eli – old in age, and experienced in the life of faith. You're wondering if the church will continue to decline or whether God will revive and renew the church.

A cautionary note here if you feel you're an Eli – Eli was a terrible leader! Earlier, before Samuel was born, Eli mistook Hannah's silent prayer of deep devotion, for drunkenness (*1 Samuel 1:13*). The worst crime of Eli was that he didn't control his sons, who were also his assistant priests. They stole the best portions of sacrifices from God for themselves (*2:12-17*) and they sexually abused women. (*1 Samuel 2:22*). Eli had no control over his sons and so failed to protect the people of Israel from abuse. Eli, the old priest of God, had failed, and the priestly order had lost its authority and credibility, and so God spoke directly to the boy Samuel.

But let's look again at Eli. Here was an old man who *could* have felt quite resentful that after all his years of service to God, God had overlooked him and was speaking to a boy. But no, it was Eli, the old man, who *interpreted the boy's experience* and explained that it was the voice of God - reassured Samuel that this was for real. No, he didn't resent Samuel finding favour with God. Not only that, the message Samuel had to convey to Eli from God was a very hard one. Eli could have been angry, could have refused to believe that this was God speaking to the boy, especially when the boy's word from God was a judgement on Eli himself. BUT he responds with deep faith and acceptance.

Eli was a mentor for the young boy, interpreting Samuel's experience, helping him to encounter God.

The crisis engulfing us for the past year has challenged everything, including the church. All churches and denominations are wrestling with the questions, "What do we learn from this? What is God saying? How will the church look in the future? How do we serve a hurting chaotic world?" Which voices should we listen to?"

Some years ago, I was at a church gathering where we had spent a weekend looking at the future, asking those same questions. Some of those present, especially younger members, were speaking out about their vision, and the changes they believed were needed for the church to fulfil its calling under God. Eventually, one older member said, "That's all very well, but we older people are in the majority, and we can't cope with these new ideas and approaches. We can't do new things. We can't work with young people. We can't do anything." Another, wiser, older person said, "But we can make sure we don't get in the way."

A church of Elis

"But we can make sure we don't get in the way."
We have to be aware that in this period of challenge to the church, God might bypass those of us who are older, and speak directly to young people in a new way.

As this year unfolds, we will hopefully start to emerge from lockdown and crisis to a more hopeful future. In the church, some are hoping for a return to 'normal', to going back to the way we did things before. Others, like Samuel, will have heard God speak, and may well be bearers of a message to us all which will not necessarily be comfortable to hear.

The challenge to those of us who are older is to be like Eli, open to hearing a possibly unwelcome message from God, maybe communicated by less obvious voices. Will we listen? Will we recognise God's voice? Will we be willing *not* to get in the way of change? In our first hymn, we sang,

Jesus calls us to each other: vastly different though we are;
race and colour, class and gender neither limit nor debar,
Join the hand of friend and stranger; join the hands of age and youth;
join the faithful and the doubter in their common search for truth.

We all have unconscious biases. They are not intentional, but perhaps we need gently to hold each other to account in the ways these unintentional biases can blind us to recognising God at work in unexpected people.

Maybe we can seek to be a church of Elis, a church of mentors. We can look for the places where God is speaking to children and young people, or to those new in the faith, who might not recognise that it is God calling them. We could use our wisdom, knowledge and experience to guide them. Every Samuel needs an Eli! Then we need to listen to what God might be saying to *us* through them.

Philip and Nathanael – Come and See

There is not time today to look at the story of Philip and Nathanael, except to notice that, just as Samuel needed Eli, Nathanael needed Philip. Philip was the uncomplicated, eager disciple. He responds to Jesus straight away, and then finds Nathanael and says, "Come and see."

There are many Nathanaels waiting for a Philip to say, "Come and See."

They may be open-minded but sceptical people, who need that bit of encouragement to get nearer and encounter Jesus for themselves.

How about you?

Could you be like Philip, and invite someone else simply to "Come and see"? Is there something so wonderful and attractive about your life with Jesus, that you want to share it?

Mentoring younger Christians, inviting others to come and see – we don't undertake these things alone. God goes before us, speaking straight into the hearts of young and old, open and sceptical.

Earlier in the service, we celebrated with the psalmist, the God who searches us and knows us. This is the God who discerns our thoughts from far away, who is acquainted with all our ways, who knows what we're going to say before we say it. (*Psalms 139*)

And this is also the God who loves us to the uttermost.

Prayer

God who loves us to the uttermost, thank you for calling us to follow Jesus. Thank you for those who are part of our story – the ones who said "Come and see", those who encouraged us, interpreted our experience for us, and helped us to recognise you.

Forgive us that we are not always ready to do the same for others.

Help us to be like Eli, willing to mentor those who are younger in the faith.

Help us to be like Philip, eager to invite others to "Come and see".

Help us to recognise you in unexpected people, and to listen to what you want to say to us through them.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

StF 391/H&P 777 - O breath of life, come sweeping through us

<https://vimeo.com/423223087> (has an extra verse at the end)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6nvWF7JGcl> (slightly more contemporary feel)

O Breath of life, come sweeping through us,

revive your church with life and power;
O Breath of Life, come, cleanse, renew us,
and fit your church to meet this hour.

O Wind of God, come bend us, break us,
till humbly we confess our need;
then in your tenderness remake us,
revive, restore, for this we plead.

O Breath of love, come breathe within us,
renewing thought and will and heart;
come, love of Christ, afresh to win us,
revive your church in every part.

Elizabeth Ann Head (Bessie Porter Head) (1850-1936)

Prayers of concern

*At the time of preparing this service, national and world events are changing fast daily.
Please include up-to-date needs and situations in your prayers, as well as local and personal concerns.*

Let us pray.

God, most gracious and most holy,
grant us the help of your Spirit
as we pray for the Church and the world.

We pray for the Church in every land . . .
for this church and for other local churches . . .
that we may worship and serve you
with reverence and joy.

Silence

Lord, hear us.
Lord, graciously hear us.

We pray for the peoples of the world . . .
and for the leaders of the nations . . .
that all may work together for justice and peace.

Silence

Lord, hear us.
Lord, graciously hear us.

We pray for those who are ill or distressed . . .
for the lonely and the bereaved . . .
and for those in any other need or trouble . . .
that they may be comforted and sustained.

Silence

Lord, hear us.
Lord, graciously hear us.

Father, we remember before you
all your servants who have died in the faith of Christ . . .

We pray that we too may lead faithful and godly lives in
this world,
and finally share with all the saints in everlasting joy;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

StF 492/H&P 709 - Christ be my leader

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eTBAiLXbjJ8> (tune – Slane)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpbURbXdndk> (tune – Slane)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=seaoQwaa3Bk> (tune - Trisagion, sung by a Methodist
choir and orchestra)

Christ be my leader by night as by day;
safe through the darkness for he is the way.
Gladly I follow, my future his care,
darkness is daylight when Jesus is there.

Christ be my teacher in age as in youth,
drifting or doubting, for he is the truth.
Grant me to trust him, though shifting as sand,
doubt cannot daunt me; in Jesus I stand.

Christ be my Saviour in calm as in strife;
death cannot hold me, for he is the life.
Nor darkness nor doubting nor sin and its stain
can touch my salvation: with Jesus I reign.

Timothy Dudley-Smith (b. 1926)

Blessing

God's blessing be ours:
a blessing of loving kindness,
a blessing of hope and courage,
a blessing of listening and love,
God's blessing be ours,
always. Amen. (*Ruth Burgess in "Winter", Wild Goose Publications*)