

SERMON TITLE: "A Little Child Shall Lead Them: A Boy Who Heard God's Voice"
SERMON TEXT: 1 Samuel 3:1-21
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 6, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2017, United Methodist Communications ran a Facebook request for stories about "amazing kids." In response, all kinds of wonderful and inspirational stories came in, telling about talented and energetic children who created programs, collected items, or raised money for great causes like food banks, pet food for animal shelters, bike helmets, school supplies, clean water wells in Nicaragua, Christmas toys for needy families, and more.

Because it goes along with our September Mission Emphasis, I decided to share with you the story about Kayla Smith of the Jerome United Methodist Church in Plain City, Ohio. Kayla had overheard her mother's friend talking about how expensive diapers were for her baby. So Kayla thought, instead of getting presents for herself for her 10th birthday, she would ask people in her church and others to help her collect diapers for families in need. For her 10th birthday, it made sense to try to collect 10,000 diapers. Kayla happily received 12,000. A year later, for her 11th birthday, Kayla increased her goal to 15,000, and she collected 16,000. "The funniest part," said Kayla, "was every day we'd get diapers in the mail. The mailman was like, Why is she getting so many diapers?"

Kayla said her next goal would be to get a whole delivery truck full of diapers. But then her goal would have to be increased to getting a loading dock, and for that, she'd need the goal of obtaining a whole warehouse in which to store all the diapers. Feeling encouraged by her success, Kayla offered this advice to others who might follow her example: "Just go with what your heart tells you to do."*

Obviously, Kayla is a girl who can dream big dreams and inspire and lead other people. And that goes very well with the sermon series I want to preach during this month of September. I'm calling the series "A Little Child Shall Lead Them." Those words are a quotation from Isaiah 11:6 that describes

what life would be like in God's peaceable kingdom. In this series, we're going to recall a variety of biblical stories of children who listened to God and answered God's call. Beginning today with young Samuel, we're going to see how the stories of these children will inspire and lead us.

1—NURTURING PARENTS

Charles read to us from First Samuel, chapter three. But young Samuel's story really begins in chapter one, where we read about Samuel's parents. His father was Elkanah, who had two wives, Penninah and Hannah. Penninah had borne some children, but Hannah had none. Hannah was quite distraught about her barrenness, and, one time, when she was worshiping at the temple in Shiloh, Hannah let loose with her tears. Weeping bitterly, she prayed that—if God would give her a male child—she would dedicate that child to God. And, in fact, that's what happened. In due time, Hannah conceived and bore a son, whom she named Samuel. After Samuel was weaned, Hannah took him to the temple at Shiloh and handed young Samuel over to the priest Eli. "For this child I prayed," she said, "and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is given to the Lord" (1:27f.). With that act of worship, Hannah and her husband Elkanah left their toddler boy there at the temple to be raised as a servant of God.

This information about Samuel's origins indicates how important nurturing parents are in early life formation. Somewhere we might have heard a story about a child who overcame horrific early childhood deprivation to somehow rise up and do amazing things. But such a story would be the exception that proves the rule. By far, it's the norm that any child who is going to grow up to lead and inspire others will be a child who got a good start in life with parents who loved and nurtured that baby and toddler. Having a parent who attentively feeds, holds, cuddles, bathes, and changes dirty diapers is critical. Having a parent who gently interacts with words, inflections, and facial expressions—with lots of smiles and eye contact—is what allows a baby to bond and build the trust that he or she needs to thrive and develop.

Having one parent who can do these things is essential; having two parents who can do these things is even better. We can't tell from the story how involved father Elkanah was in baby Samuel's day-to-day care. But we are told that Elkanah loved Hannah and supported her decisions. Before the birth of Samuel, Elkanah had provided well for Hannah, so he probably did so for both his wife and her young child. And the story indicates that Elkanah was a spiritual man who led his family in worship and commitment to God. This parental nurture was vital in setting the stage for Samuel to become a child who could lead his people.

2—SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

Of course, anyone who's ever been a parent knows that we parents can't raise children all on our own. It takes a village, right? In this story of the boy who heard God's voice, we also see the importance of a supportive community. Every child who will become a leader needs other adults and mentors beyond the nuclear family.

If Hannah and Elkanah had kept Samuel at their home, he might have grown up to be a strong man who did good things. But because they were willing to entrust him to a teacher and advisor at the temple, the priest Eli was able to guide young Samuel and raise him up to become a trustworthy prophet of the Lord and a faithful leader of the nation of Israel. At the time when God was ready to call Samuel, Eli was there as supportive community, giving the guidance of a mentor from outside the family, helping Samuel to understand God in ways his parents might not have been able to teach him.

In this time of COVID-19, all families everywhere are having to adapt. As functions of the community have been limited and changed, moms and dads have had to become teachers, nurses, and coaches—as well as parents. But, even in this time of social restrictions, parents still do need outside support. If for no other reason than to keep from going stir crazy, parents need to seek and accept the help of trusted grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbors, doctors, counselors, daycare workers, Sunday School teachers, church youth group leaders, Scout leaders, and ministers. And, even in this time of

limited outside exposure, children still do need persons in the community to care about them, pray for them, encourage them, and challenge them. Fortunately, most of us can mail birthday cards, make phone calls, and send text messages. Hopefully, we older ones are also learning to use Zoom and other interactive technologies so we can communicate and volunteer safely and effectively with our grandchildren and other young people. As the story of Samuel indicates, our young ones need mentors in addition to their moms and dads. To become leaders of our church, our community, and our nation, our young people need to have a supportive community.

3—DEDICATED INDIVIDUALS

So, in order for young Samuel to develop into a prophet of the Lord and a leader of his people, he needed nurturing parents and a supportive community. That leaves, of course, the role of young Samuel himself. For children to become leaders, they must also become dedicated individuals.

No matter how well his parents had loved and nurtured him; and no matter how well the priest Eli might have supported, encouraged, and taught him; Samuel still had free will. He still had the choice to do or not do as he pleased. First Samuel chapter two tells about Eli's own sons, who made wicked choices. Like Samuel, they grew up under their father Eli's religious training. Surely, they would have been the ones most likely to be groomed for the position of leader of the Hebrew people. And yet, they chose to disrespect God and their people. They chose to make mockery of the Jewish faith.

Samuel, on the other hand, took his role very seriously. He claimed his mother's faith that he had been born as a child of promise. He claimed the covenant that he was loaned to God for an important purpose. He claimed his role of listening for and hearing God's voice. When God spoke to him, Samuel asked questions and learned. When he heard God's voice, Samuel responded to the call: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." And, after he heard God's voice, Samuel shared God's word with the priest Eli and with all Israel. So, from the tribe of Dan to the region of Beersheba, the people knew that Samuel heard and spoke God's words.

Today, whether we're three years old or thirteen, whether we're 33 or 83, we all can be dedicated individuals who claim our role as leaders. We can hear God's call to us and respond, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

CONCLUSION

Our own United Methodist history has a story of a little child who would lead us. I know, we normally think of John Wesley as a full grown man who stood tall as he preached in pulpits and fields and who rode around on horseback. But, before all that, John Wesley was a child, growing up in the English community of Epworth. The Wesley family lived in a house that was two stories high. One night the thatch roof of their house caught on fire. When they woke up and realized what was happening, father Samuel and mother Susanna did their best to get all eight of their children outdoors to safety. But, after counting the many heads, they realized that five-year old John was missing.

Luckily a neighbor finally spotted John standing at an upstairs window. There was no time to get a ladder, so one man stood on another man's shoulders and reached up to pull little John from the flames. Susanna later referred to her son as "a brand plucked from the burning." This miraculous rescue from death made a lasting impression and gave young John a purpose that he never forgot. Because of the strong influence of his parents, the role of the community in saving his life and shaping his thinking, and because of his own choice to believe and serve God, John Wesley was able to hear God's voice and share it. Little Johnny Wesley—or "Jackie", as they called him then—was able to become a leader of hundreds, thousands, and now millions of Methodists and others who have benefitted from his life and service.

As we've seen in the story of the boy Samuel who heard God's voice, a little child shall lead them. Now may we be the nurturing parents, the supportive community, and the dedicated individuals who make that happen.

* <https://www.umc.org/en/content/amazing-kids-of-the-united-methodist-church>