

January 17, 2021

11:30 a.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Since last Sunday's Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, the Christmas Season has officially come to an end. All the Christmas decorations here in our Cathedral have been put away for another year, and I imagine that most of us have done the same in our own homes.

Liturgically, we have returned to the Ordinary Time of the Year---at least for the next 4 weeks until Lent begins a month from today on Ash Wednesday. And just as we do at the beginning of each new year when we make resolutions for how this year will be better, or what we might do differently, these early days of the Ordinary Time of the Year take us back to the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, and give us the opportunity to watch Jesus begin to do what He was born 30 years earlier on Christmas to do. His years living within His Holy Family, and of being prepared for His life's vocation, have come to an end; Jesus now responds to the "Call" of His Father to launch His mission of bringing salvation to the world.

Today's Readings focus our attention on God's "Call" to all of us, and asks us to reflect on how well we are responding. While the idea of making "New Year's Resolutions" is a nice idea, and can be very helpful in developing a new plan for healthier living thru a better diet, more exercise, limiting "screen time", how often do we pause at the beginning of a new year to ask ourselves: what is God calling me to do? How is God calling me to live? Am I listening to what God is speaking to my heart? It is absolutely certain that God has a plan for each of us. He created us---gave us the gift of life---for a purpose. When was the last time you asked yourself if the purpose you've set for your life, and the purpose that God has in mind for your life, are one and the same?

God doesn't just "call" the special people we hear about in the Bible; He didn't just "call" those we just heard about in today's Readings: Samuel, in our First Reading; the two disciples of John the Baptist who began following after the One John pointed out when he said: "*Behold---look; there is the Lamb of God!*"; or even the "call" that the Father gave to Jesus to begin His public ministry of establishing the Kingdom of God in this world. God calls all of us; each of us has a distinct purpose in God's Plan for how we can help to build up the Kingdom of God. We could say that our lifetime "mission" is to: 1) attune our ears to hear

God's Voice in the midst of the other "noise" of this world, 2) live our lives according to His Will, and 3) to do so by being joyful and faithful disciples of Jesus in this world. So, today's Readings can really help us--- if we listen to how others have responded to God's call, and learn from them.

In today's First Reading from the First Book of Samuel, we heard how God directly called the young boy, Samuel, while he was sleeping in the Temple. He did not know God, or much about God. He heard God's Voice, but he thought it was the voice of the old priest Eli. So, he got up, three different times, and ran to Eli, saying: *"Here I am, you called me."* Finally, the old priest realized that it must be God Who was calling the child, so Eli coached Samuel as to what to say if he was called another time. And that is what Samuel did. When he heard God's Voice the next time, he answered: *"Speak Lord, your servant is listening."*

Sometimes, God "speaks" to us directly in quiet, ordinary, ways; sometimes, God "speaks" to us through others, or through life experiences. We need to realize that God doesn't shout, nor does God force us; on the other hand, God also doesn't give up on us----Just as He did with Samuel, so God will keep "calling" us with the hope that eventually we will "listen" and faithfully respond.

So, another very important question we need to ask ourselves is: are we trying to listen? Do we make time, each day, to quiet ourselves in prayer? Or, do we not even consider the possibility that God might be trying to speak to our hearts, and never take the time to listen?

Similarly, in the Psalm Response to today's Scripture Readings we prayed those beautiful words: *"Here am I Lord, I come to do your will."* That is such a beautiful and powerful prayer for all of us; only 10 little words---nothing complex or overly theological for us to understand. How different would our lives be if we could spend some time each day making those two brief prayers a part of each day: *"Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."* *"Here am I Lord, I come to do your will"*.

In today's Gospel passage, which takes place right after Jesus was baptized, John the Baptist points to Jesus Who was walking past them, and says: *"Behold, the Lamb of God!"* Two of his own disciples, Andrew and probably John, leave him to begin following after Jesus. When Jesus notices them, He turns to them, and asks: *"What are you looking for?"* Those are the very first words spoken by Jesus in the Gospel of John, and the question Jesus asks those two disciples is also

the question Jesus asks YOU and me. When Andrew and John accepted Jesus' invitation, it changed their lives. In fact, St. John, who wrote this Gospel decades later when he was an old man, remembered the exact moment of this life-changing encounter, as we heard in today's passage: *"So they went and saw where Jesus was staying, and they stayed with Him that day. It was about four in the afternoon."*

There are only a handful of moments in our lives that are so significant that we remember the exact time of day when they occurred. For those of us old enough to remember, we know exactly where we were and what we were doing when President John Kennedy was assassinated, and life changed forever. All of us remember the exact moment when we heard the news about the attack on the World Trade Center on "September 11th". Some of you remember the moment you decided that you were going to marry your spouse; the moment that you learned you were pregnant with your first child; the moment you graduated or secured your "dream job"; the moment when someone near and dear to you died.

"What/Who are you looking for?" is a critically important question that we need to ask ourselves at the beginning of this New Year, as we return to our Liturgical Ordinary Time----actually, it's a question we need to ask ourselves regularly. And depending on how you answer the question, the next question should be: is what you are looking for bringing you true and lasting happiness?

When Jesus asked that question the first time of the two disciples seeking after "their purpose of life", and invited them to *"Come, and you will see"*, that's when they began their life-long vocation of discipleship, and from that moment on, the rest of their lives revolved around Jesus.

I read recently of a study of human behavior which revealed that most people, either never find their purpose in life, or fail to achieve it. If true, that's a very sad statement, and means that people are leading lives without a purpose. Could that be because they don't take the time to do any self-reflection on the meaning of their lives, or because they're not "listening" to God's call in their lives?

Father Pedro Arrupe, the "saintly" Superior General of the Jesuits who died in 1991, wrote that "the essence of the human vocation is to fall in love with God." And then he wrote this: "What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in

the mornings, what you do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, what you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.”

For Andrew and John, for the other 10 Apostles, for countless millions of Saints in Heaven and our “next door saints” here on earth----that’s exactly what happened to them. They fell in love with Jesus; Jesus is the One Who gives their lives purpose---meaning---direction.

St. Paul urged the Corinthians in today’s Second Reading to avoid anything that would keep us from fulfilling our purpose, or that would separate us from the love of Christ----what he referred to as “immorality”. We sometimes think of “immorality” only in a narrow definition of “sexual sins” or “sins of the flesh”. But anything that leads us away from Christ, or causes us to act in ways that are opposed to the Gospel, would also be “acts of immorality”.

These last months have been challenging times to say the least. Dealing with the ongoing worldwide pandemic, and all the stress, fear, and pain that continues to result in everyone’s lives is taking a huge toll in human lives lost and in many other ways as well. On top of that---or perhaps contributing to that---is the growing division taking place within our society due to racial tensions, and the political/ideological differences that reached the tumultuous and scandalous point of violence and hatred last week at our Nation’s Capitol, and which continue to be a cause of great concern for the peaceful transfer of power that is to take place this coming Wednesday as our new President will be inaugurated.

While there are many explanations as to why we are at this very unfortunate place in our country, one reason that could explain this dilemma is that we have forgotten how to “listen”----to God, to one another, and to the dictates of our own conscience. The more that people talk at one another, the greater the divisions become. Open and attentive listening to others is what can free us from assumptions, prejudices, and obsessions with our own opinions. We desperately need to be more like Samuel and say: *Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.*”

Does anyone doubt that if we asked Jesus what we should do, that His emphatic answer would be exactly what He taught in the Beatitudes: “Love one another as sisters and brothers; speak the truth to one another with respect for each other’s human dignity; forgive your enemies; and pray for those who persecute you.”

St. Paul's directive tells us in no uncertain terms to *"avoid immorality, because the immoral person sins against his own body."* The "body" means our own individual bodies, as well as the Body of Christ. Violence, racism, malicious speech, and acts of hatred sin against the Body of Christ, and represent a failure to see that every human person is created by God in His own image and likeness, and ignores what St. Paul reminded us today: *"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?"* We need to do what Pope Francis so often teaches us: to "see the Face of Jesus' in every person we meet, including those who think or act differently than we do.

Today's Readings take us back to the beginning of Jesus' public life, to the beginning of this new year, to the beginning of Ordinary Time, and to ask us----all of us---what is the meaning of your life? What is the purpose of your life? Where are you going? Who/What are you looking for? God "calls" each of us----1) to listen to His Word; 2) to open our hearts to follow God's will; 3) to respect one another as members of the Body of Christ; and 4) to follow Jesus wherever He leads us.

Our life's calling----our Vocation----is to fall in Love, with God, and with all that God has created. Like Samuel, like the disciples, like Jesus Himself, like all the Saints who have gone before us, and those who live among us. Let us pray: *"Here am I Lord, I come to do Your will; Speak Lord, your servant is listening."*

God bless you, now and always!