

SERMON TITLE: “The Gospel is... The People of God”

TEXT: 1 Samuel 3:1-20

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

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Last week I introduced a sermon series addressing the question “What is the Gospel?” For those who weren’t here, the series was provoked in part by the dawn of a new year and the “big questions” that often come into view around any new beginning, and in part by Scot McKnight’s excellent book *The King Jesus Gospel*.

If I were to summarize McKnight’s argument in this book it would be this: the “gospel” is not the means by which individual souls are saved, but the broad story of God’s redemptive work in the world from creation to new creation.

Last week we began at the beginning, and looked at how the gospel begins with creation—about the “good news” that our world and we were intended to be by God, and how this gospel truth is vitally necessary in our postmodern, post-Christian context that struggles with questions of meaning and purpose.

Last week I also said that the Greek word we translate into English, as “gospel” is *eungelion*, which means “good news.”

But you and I weren’t there when so much of this gospel story took place. How do we hear this news? How does this news come to us, two thousand years later?

Well, it comes to us in a variety of ways, one of which is Scripture. But the Bible is a big book, containing a lot of news! Why do we need *all* of it? Especially all of that nasty stuff in the first part!

I came across these sentiments this week in a *National Post* article by Charles Lewis called “Reading the Bible—Even the Really Boring and Painful Parts”¹:

I decided to start reading the Bible from beginning to end — from Genesis to Revelation — without skipping any of the boring or painful parts in between... I do not want the easy way out.

I have read the whole of the New Testament in the past as well as many parts of the Old Testament but never have been able to go from end to end. Though I have tried several times.

¹ <http://life.nationalpost.com/2012/01/11/charles-lewis-reading-the-bible-even-the-really-boring-and-painful-parts/>

I am doing this for several reasons — but mainly because I am stubborn and it seems ridiculous to me that I cannot plough through the whole thing. On the other hand, if it is that difficult, why do I bother? The incredible legalisms, endless battles between groups whose names I never remember and the non-stop massacres and treachery would defeat most anyone. And certainly it is easy to get so buried in what seems to be obscurity that it just seems easier and more fun to pick up a spy novel....

I think Lewis expresses sentiments familiar to many of us.

Many of us, if we are honest, have felt the same way. All those genealogies, and wars, and strange tales of people who lived for hundreds of year, all of that doom and gloom and warning. Sometimes it's pretty tough reading.

A few years ago, a woman came into my study on the verge of tears after attempting a reading plan similar to Lewis's and said, "I'm in the middle of Jeremiah and you either need to explain to me what's going on or give me permission to stop reading! **Who is this God?!**" This was no abstract, intellectual question for her—her view of God was at stake!

For many Christians, throughout history, the story of Israel has been seen almost as an embarrassment to explain away, or something to consign to the "preamble to Jesus" category in our minds and in our understandings of Scripture. It had nothing to do with the gospel.

(The most prominent of these was a first-century teacher named Marcion who concluded that the OT and NT were talking about different Gods. The Jewish God was evil and Jesus was good. His solution? Eliminate the OT—and a good chunk of the NT, whose writers were Jewish!)

If we occasionally puzzle over this long history of these particular people from whom our Saviour emerges, we can at least take comfort in the fact that we aren't the first ones to do so!

We know that Jesus is a Jew and that Jesus fulfills the hope of the Jewish Scriptures... We know that the story of Israel is somehow part of our story as Christians, but... how? And why?

What can we learn from Israel? Or, perhaps more importantly, what does the presence of Israel in God's gospel story tell us about God, about humanity, and about the nature of the gospel?

Our text this morning is a well-known one. It is the story of the boy Samuel—the story of his call, and later on, his rise to prominence as a leader and prophet of Israel.

There are at least two things to note as we consider the question of the role of Israel in God's gospel story.

1. Samuel stands at a crossroads in Israel's story itself—he is the bridge between the people who were called by God to be a blessing to the nations way back in Genesis 12, who emerged out of slavery in Egypt, who lived throughout the chaos and lawlessness of the book of Judges and the *nation* of Israel—a nation of kings like Saul and David and Solomon.

So, from the perspective of the narrative itself, Samuel is a crucial figure in moving the people of Israel along in the story. Samuel is the one who will eventually crown David as king, and promise him a kingdom that will last forever.

Today, we understand Jesus as the fulfillment of this promise, and the kingdom that will last forever as the kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurated.

So, Samuel is an important character in the story of Israel.

2. The story of Samuel's call also illustrates something important about how we hear and respond to the voice of God

Notice what it says in 1 Samuel 3:1—"The word of the Lord was rare in those days." It was a dark time of corruption and uncertainty. Samuel is described as not yet knowing the Lord (3:7).

Samuel has a dream. He hears a voice, but he assumes it's the old priest Eli. Twice, he rushes to Eli's side. Twice Eli says it wasn't him. The third time, Eli tells the boy Samuel to respond, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Samuel does this, and the rest of the chapter talks about the rather unpleasant message Samuel receives about the downfall of Eli and his sons.

It's interesting that Samuel needs to lean on Eli to figure out how to hear the voice of God. He doesn't just understand the voice of God. He doesn't just arrive at the conclusion that it is God who is speaking on his own. There is uncertainty, trial and error, a bit of confusion, both on the part of the old priest and the young boy.

But collectively they come to the conclusion that God is speaking and that they should listen.

This is not necessarily a text that is explicitly about discerning the voice of God or the process of faith formation, but I think it is interesting nonetheless.

It gives us an example that none of us relate to God entirely on our own.

We all have help—whether explicitly or implicitly in the examples and lessons learned from others throughout our lives.

None of us start from zero. All of us have “inherited” the faith from someone.

All faith is *received* faith.

God has bound us to one another—here and now, and across time—no matter how we might resist the idea that we have to rely on others for our salvation.

This is *good news*—especially in our individualistic culture, and with the individualistic assumptions that are behind so much of what we think and do.

Lesslie Newbigin was an Anglican missionary to India in the 20th century. In *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* he probes some of these assumptions, including the one that we ought not to have to depend on another for that which is necessary for our salvation.

The heroic individual on a quest for truth has always been a more attractive path. We like to think of ourselves as self-sufficient and intelligent and spiritual and moral enough to come to God and follow him on our own.

Yet, the story of the Bible calls into question this entire way of understanding who we are as human beings, the nature of the problems that face us, and how these problems are to be overcome.

Here’s what Newbigin says:

There is, there can be, **no private salvation**, no salvation which does not involve us with one another.... God’s saving revelation of himself does not come to us straight down from above—through the skylight, as we might say. In order to receive God’s saving revelation, we have to open the door to the neighbor whom he sends as his appointed messenger, and—moreover—to receive that messenger not as a temporary teacher or guide whom we can dispense with when we ourselves have learned what is needed, but as one who will permanently share our home. There is no salvation except one in which we are saved together through the one whom God sends to be the bearer of his salvation.

There is no salvation which does not involve us with one another. In order to receive God’s salvation, we have to open the door to the neighbour he sends.

This is good news!

Last week, the good news was perhaps easier to see than this week. *Of course* creation is good news! We love creation, we love beauty and diversity and colour and majestic scenes that display God's glory.

Maybe for you, this week, the good news is a bit harder to see.

Why *does* God force us to rely on each other for our salvation?! Why *doesn't* he just drop salvation down from the skylight? Why *do* we have to involve ourselves with ancient stories of "primitive," unsophisticated people who behave badly and whose names are hard to pronounce? How is the story of Israel good news?

I think that Israel and its role in the story of salvation, at its very core, teach us to be grateful for others on the journey and for their role in our salvation.

It teaches us that we are not islands—that our role in this life isn't to attain salvation as individual souls, but participate in it and lean on one another as communities, as families.

It teaches us that we need each other and that we were made to need each other. The quest for truth was not made to be a solitary pursuit but a shared experience, where we hear from God, receive from God, learn about God, worship and serve God **together**.

All of us have received faith from someone.

No matter if our faith is weak or strong, no matter if we came to follow Jesus late in life or early, no matter if our decision was the result of a long period of wrestling or came in a flash of inspiration, all of us owe a debt of gratitude to those who preceded us in the story.

All of us rely on others—parents, friends, teachers, authors, friends, mentors... All of us draw from the legacy of the Christian tradition and the story of Scripture—even the parts we may not like or understand very well!

We are not solo pilgrims—thank God! We did not figure this faith thing out on our own. And we do not journey alone.

There is one final reason that the story of Israel is good news.

One of the implications of our inheriting the faith, receiving it from others across time, is that we have a responsibility to pass this along—to be bearers of Christ to those who will follow us in the gospel story.

Samuel listened to Eli and responded to the voice of God as he had been instructed: "Speak, your servant is listening." Samuel went on to be one of

Israel's most famous prophets—one who spoke the word of the Lord to kings, who told the truth, who challenged corruption and sin.

Samuel received his place in the story of God from those who had gone before him, and he played his role in moving the story forward—to bearing the truth of God to and for those God had entrusted into his care.

We are to do the same.

Our gratitude at inheriting this story—even the confusing parts—is to translate into continuing to tell and live the story to others.

It is good news that we were made to need one another on the journey of faith.

It is good news that God comes to us, and speaks to us, and reveals himself to us in the face of each other.

Thanks be to God.

Next week, we will move on to the story of Jesus and the central role he plays in the gospel story.