



**Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA**

**Rev. Scott E. Schul**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany: January 17, 2021**

**Sermon Title: “Do miracles only happen on football fields?”**

**Sermon Text: 1 Sam. 3:1-20**

Well friends, as I’m sure most of you are aware, we are in the midst not only of the season of *Epiphany*, but also *NFL playoff season*. At the risk of dipping my toe in heresy, I will concede that there are a few things that overlap between those two seemingly unrelated seasons. First, *Sunday* is the high holy day for both. Second, the football playoffs are one of the few times when both Catholics and Protestants are equally passionate about “*Hail Mary’s*.” And finally, enthusiasts for both seasons are known to speak a lot about *miracles*.

Now I’ll be honest with you. I don’t think God spends a whole lot of time worrying about who wins football games. But all of this talk about miracles raises an important cultural question for us. *Do miracles only happen on football fields?* Have improbable outcomes in sports become the *primary*, or maybe even the *sole* means, by which we think of miracles?

I wonder if we throw the word “miracle” around so casually and informally because, as a society, we think the age of miracles has passed. Many today would argue that we are a civilized, sophisticated, scientific society. They would say that everything can be measured, explained and predicted, so we no longer need to fall back on “miracles” as an explanation of that which we cannot understand. They would concede that some things may occur that are *improbable*, but they would never admit the existence of, or a need for, a God who truly works miracles. What do you think? *Do you* believe God is still working miracles today?

In some ways our world is similar to the times chronicled in our Old Testament reading from First Samuel. It states that “the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” It was a world much like ours, a world where God was perceived to be absent, uninterested, and unengaged. A young boy named Samuel was serving in the temple under the tutelage of an old priest named Eli. Twice, in the middle of the night, Samuel was summoned by a voice that cried, “Samuel! Samuel!” Thinking it was his master Eli, Samuel ran to Eli and said, “Here I am!” Eli counseled Samuel both times to go back to sleep. Finally, after the voice spoke a third time, Eli figured out what was going on and gave Samuel a new instruction: respond to the call by saying, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” To Samuel’s credit, he was obedient both to Eli and to the voice, and was eventually called to take his place as God’s prophet, with all of the joy and heartbreak that call entailed.

What do *we* take away from the call of Samuel? Was this a miracle? I think so, without a doubt. God spoke to Samuel and set him upon a new path, one guided and directed by God, a path that would forever change Samuel and his nation. But that was then and this is now... Is God *still* calling people today? Again, I have no doubt. God is calling out to people every day.

Even now God is calling some to rostered ministry and other fulltime service within Christ's Church.

But God's call isn't limited to ministry as a career. Since 1898, when this congregation was chartered, God has been calling the people of Grace Lutheran to all manner of service within God's Kingdom. Some are called to serve on council. God calls others to serve as ushers, greeters, team leaders of our social ministry outreach programs, Super Wednesday cooks, youth ministry volunteers, gardeners who preach Christ's love through the beauty of flowers, musicians who proclaim God's glory through song, teachers, communion servers, audio techs... the list goes on and on.

The pandemic has undeniably caused a lot of problems for a lot of people, including the Church. But as we've been forced out of the comfort zone of doing things the same way we've done them for the last 50 years, we've also experienced some surprisingly rich blessings. One of them is that I believe our Grace members are more engaged in ministry than ever before in the history of our congregation. Just think about the ministry that you and your fellow members have taken on during the pandemic. We have teams of people systematically calling and checking in on their fellow members; people who are delivering and administering Holy Communion to the homebound; and others who are sending greeting cards.

In addition, consider all of the members who came together for our Old Bethlehem Christmas Eve celebration. We had a member who designed, sawed, and assembled our manger and creche. People decorated our grounds, came together online in virtual choirs, stood in the rain to direct traffic, and hauled animals to our living nativity. Individuals and entire families volunteered their time to be in the nativity as well. Over 150 people contributed their time and talent to making our Christmas Eve celebration happen. They were responding to God's call. That was no less a miracle than what we read in First Samuel.

But God's call to love and serve is far bigger than what happens at church. Martin Luther taught that all Christians are called by God to service within God's Kingdom, and that for each of us, that calling begins in our baptism.<sup>1</sup> This is reflected in our baptismal liturgy, in which we promise, in response to God's love, to "proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace."<sup>2</sup>

And so at work, at school, in the office, at the factory, on a school bus, at the grocery store, or visiting with neighbors on your front porch, God is calling you to serve others and to be a witness of God's love. The vital work of sharing God's love, teaching God's Word, and exemplifying God's virtues is likewise an integral part of being a parent, a spouse, a friend, and a neighbor. It is vital, holy work. It doesn't require an advanced degree or a perfect life. We need only trust that the God who is *calling* us to do something will *equip* us to do it, regardless of our age, experience level, or how new, scary or uncomfortable that calling might feel.

God extends these calls to us in a wide variety of ways. Maybe you'll hear a voice, as Samuel did. Others may feel a strong pull to follow a particular path. Usually, the miracle of God's call to us is subtle, like a whisper, and not a massive flashing billboard. As was the case with Samuel, it can be challenging to distinguish mere ambitions from God's call. And so we,

like Samuel, should interpret these things *in community*. Samuel needed Eli's wise counsel in order to understand that God was working a miracle and extending a call. Likewise, discussing our problems and concerns with others can help us see how God is working in our life, and can help us track the path on which God is directing our footsteps.

Sometimes we might miss God's signals. But don't worry. God called Samuel three times before Samuel realized what was happening. God will be just as patient with us. God loves us and will keep calling us. Maybe it'll take 3 times, 4 times, or 400 times. Neither our stubbornness, our ignorance, nor our obliviousness can prevent God from accomplishing God's purposes and plans in our lives. God *never* gives up on us.

So friends, I hope you'll agree that miracles aren't confined to ancient history and they aren't limited to football fields. Miracles are happening all around us as God calls us to love and serve this hurting world. Near the end of worship, we'll have a special sending rite to emphasize this universal call to God's people. So like Samuel, listen carefully. For God *is* calling you. God has a miracle for you. And God just might be preparing *you* to be a miracle for someone else. Amen.

Citations:

<sup>1</sup> Bennethum, *Listen! God is Calling! Luther Speaks of Vocation, Faith, and Work*, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 228,