

Worship Service (Call) (prepared by Sarah Bruer)

Focus: God's call in our lives does not happen in isolation; it is observed and nurtured in community. This implies then that being part of God's community means noticing and nurturing God's call in the people around us

Preparation:

- Cut a large cloud like shape out of Bristol board and find a place to display it in the worship space. Cut out slips of paper in cloud shapes and gather some pens; provide one of each per person as they arrive for the service.
- Line up a volunteer to pick up the papers and stick them on the cloud during the introit. If you have younger people in your church, this would be a great opportunity to invite them to contribute to the service. If they don't get done during the hymn, they can continue collaging during the opening prayer
- If you are including the activity option, have white paper and boxes of crayons or markers (ideally with a clipboard) for those who wish to use them while listening to the sermon.

Land Acknowledgement

One: When it comes to inspiring faith in others, we Christians have not always done so in a good way. In truth, we have sometimes done so in way that caused great harm to others. One place where our mistakes are evident is in the story of colonialism here on Turtle Island. This land on which we gather is <name treaty or unceded territory> and has been the home of <name First Nations of your area> for millennia. The impacts of colonialism continue to devalue Indigenous ways of knowing, of worshipping, and of caring for one another and the land. So, we begin our service today with an acknowledgement of the harm that has been done to the people, the animals, the birds, the fish, the waters, the plants, and the land where we worship today as a result of our faith tradition. May the Creator help us to do better and move forward in a good way.

Lighting the Christ Candle

One: Leo Tolstoy once wrote "Just as one candle lights another and can light thousands of other candles, so one heart illuminates another heart and illumine thousands of other hearts". The light of this Christ candle reminds us that the light of Christ which glows in our hearts can bring light to thousands of other hearts if and when we share it.

Gathering

One: In the book of Hebrews, the apostle Paul talks about the community of faith as part of a "great cloud of witnesses". That has definitely been my experience. I wouldn't be here today without many other people who have nurtured my faith.
So as we gather for worship today, I invite you to pause and reflect for a moment.
Who are the people that contributed to you being here today...
Did you have family members who brought you to church when you were younger...
Did a friend or neighbour invite you to church with them...
Were you influenced by a Sunday school teacher or youth group leader along the way...
Might you have been impacted by an experience like singing in the church choir or attending a church women's event...
Maybe you met a minister whose leadership inspired you towards church involvement...
Or perhaps it was a book or a movie that sparked your curiosity about Christianity...

It's ok too if you have someone in mind who doesn't fit neatly into these boxes. Whoever it is that comes to mind for you, let us come into this place today with gratitude for their influence in our relationship with the God that we gather to worship today. (pause)

I invite you now to write the name or names of those you thought of on the piece of paper you received when you arrived. These will be gathered up while we sing and collaged together into a great cloud of witnesses...

Gathering Hymn - VU 707 "For the Faithful Who Have Answered"

Opening Prayer

One: Loving God, we are here today because others have nurtured our faith. For their love and their inspiration,

All: we give thanks and praise, O God.

One: We are here today because others have resisted injustice and dared to live out the good news in a hurting world. For their example and their courage,

All: we give thanks and praise, O God.

One: We are here today because you call us too to nurture the faith of others, offering them our love and inspiration. For this sacred responsibility,

All: we give thanks and praise, O God.

One: We are here today because you call us to the work of justice and peace, sharing hope on the journey. For this sacred responsibility,

All: we give thanks and praise, O God.

One: Therefore, since we are surrounded by a so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

-(Hebrews 12:1)

All: Amen.

Theme Time

One: Have any of you ever played the game tag... (listen for answers)

Awesome, so if we needed to explain the game to someone who had never played tag before, what would you say... (listen for answers)

(Summarize their responses - ie: So tag is a game where someone is 'it' and they have to catch the other people who are playing the game so someone else becomes 'it' and they can join the other people in running away.)

(If your worship context is one where it is possible, invite the kids to help you demonstrate with a round or two, then regroup to continue the conversation.)

So this seems like a game you have to play with other people. What might happen if someone tried to play tag by themselves ... (listen for answers)

Right, so that wouldn't work very well or be nearly as much fun. In order to play tag we need other people.

That reminds me of the cloud we made a few minutes ago with the names of people who have helped us get to know God.

(Referring to the big cloud) Here's the name that I put down... (Share a little bit at a kid friendly level about that person in your life - ie: Rev Joan was the minister at my church when I was a kid and I still remember her asking me when I was 9 years old if I had thought about being a minister when I grew up. I hadn't but I did after that and here I am now.)

Do any of you want to tell us about the person whose name you wrote down and how they are important to your relationship with God... (listen for answers)

I love seeing all these names. They remind me of our Bible stories for today. Although these stories aren't about God actually playing a game of tag, they remind me of that. If you pay attention, you'll hear God kind of saying "tag, you're it" to a few people in these stories.

But just like we need other people to play tag, God also needed some other people to help God get people tagged. So I also hope you'll listen for the other people in these stories too. I think that if the people God tags in these stories were with us today, those might be the names that the tagged people would add to our cloud.

Scriptures:

1 Samuel 3:1-10

John 1: 35-46

Acts 8: 26-40

Hymn - VU 509 "I the Lord of Sea and Sky"

(or any of the hymns listed in the first paragraphs of the sermon)

Activity Option

If you have people whose hands like to keep busy while they listen to the sermon, distribute clipboards with white paper and crayons. Invite those who take them to draw a picture of the people in their church like they might draw a picture of their family; and use words or symbols to show gifts that you see in people - ie: Mr Lee makes great cookies or Miriam is a wonderful musician.

Sermon

Did you know that in the back of our United Church hymn books, there is an index of songs that fit with various Bible stories? If you look up the text reference for today's reading from Samuel, for example, our hymnbooks will suggest such lovely songs about God's call in our lives as :

- Teach me God to Wonder, teach me God to see, let your world of beauty speak to me.
- Lord speak to me that I may speak in living echoes of your tone
- I have called you by your name, you are mine.

Now if I were picking hymns related to that text, I would also add the one we just sang "Here I am Lord", and maybe also "will you come and follow me if I but call your name?" And if I were attending a service filled with these songs, oh how my spirit would soar. There is something about them that resonates deeply within me. Isn't it marvellous when we feel God calling to us, inviting us personally to share our gifts with the world? Isn't it inspiring to have our hearts opened to the wonder of the world and the blessings of God?

Yet, as wonderful and true as that is, there's something else that often gets missed in passages like the ones we're remembering today because of the way we may be used to thinking about them. You see, as I mentioned at the end of theme time, each of these is a story not just about how God calls to Samuel, Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathaniel, and the Ethiopian, but also about how that call happens in the context of community. Western culture tends to focus on our personal relationship with God. The hymns I mentioned before are filled with references to "I" and "me" and "my" and there is truth in that: God does call each of us personally. However, these hymns also overlook the vital component of "we", "our" and "us" and the biblical truth is that God's call in our lives is both personal and communal. We also need to remember that we might be called to help someone else understand how God is calling them, not just to listen for how God is calling me.

So let's look at these stories again with a 'we' lens on.

Imagine you're the boy Samuel. You've been working in the temple each day and sleeping there each night since your parents dedicated you to God's service. In the night, you hear a voice calling to you "Samuel, Samuel!" You are confused and assume it must be the elderly priest Eli who cannot see very well anymore. Maybe Eli needs something. So you rush to his room. He says he didn't call you and to go back to bed. So you do, but again, you hear a voice calling your name "Samuel, Samuel!" So you rush back to Eli who says once again that he didn't call. You lie down a third time, and again hear the call "Samuel, Samuel" and return to Eli. It is in that moment that Eli, with more experience serving God, wonders if it is God who is calling to you and suggests that if you hear the voice again you should say "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening". You follow Eli's advice and a conversation with God unfolds as a result.

Samuel needed Eli's wisdom to know that it might be God calling. Eli needed Samuel to listen to God's message. Together they both ended up serving God more fully as a team than either of them could have alone. It's important to remember that this isn't just a story about Samuel and God. It's about Samuel and Eli and God and how together they can serve the community. Is there someone you know who might not realize that God might be speaking to them? Could you invite them to listen? Or is there someone who might have a message from God that you need to hear, even if the news isn't easy to accept?

Now imagine you are one of Jesus' first disciples — Andrew or Simon Peter or Philip or Nathanael. In the other three gospels, we hear how Jesus calls them while they are mending their nets. But John's gospel tells the story a little differently. In John's account, Andrew at least is already a disciple of John the Baptist and when John the Baptist sees Jesus, he says to them that Jesus is the Lamb of God. It is in response to John the Baptist's recognition of Jesus that Andrew and another follower of John the Baptist decide to follow Jesus. Jesus then invites them to "come and see" what he is all about; and in response to that experience, Andrew goes looking for his brother Simon Peter, to tell him that he has found the Messiah, God's chosen one. Simon Peter then comes along and meets Jesus too. Then the next day, Jesus says to Philip "follow me", which Phillip does; and in turn he goes off to find Nathanael and says that they have found God's chosen one. Nathanael is sceptical at first, but because he trusts his friend Phillip, he too comes to see Jesus.

There is a TED talk by a man named Derek Sivers that features someone called the Dancing Guy. It is about one guy who starts dancing alone at a music festival until something remarkable happens, someone joins him. This first person to join in, is referred to as the First Follower. And from there, the first follower inspires the second follower and the third and so on until there is a whole crowd of people dancing. The idea is that innovation requires not just the person with a great new idea, but a first follower to adopt it and inspire others to get behind it. This is kind of what we see in the story of the first disciples as John tells it. John the Baptist recognizes Jesus which inspires Andrew, who gets Simon Peter. Then Jesus recruits Philip, who also knows Andrew and Simon Peter, possibly making it easier for him to agree to come along when Jesus calls. And then Philip gets Nathanael.

God's call to us in the church can be a little like that at times as well when we think from a "we" perspective. Someone like John the Baptist perceives where God might be doing a new thing, and then a first follower, Andrew, starts a chain reaction where one person invites the next invites the next. Could you be like John the Baptist, noticing where God is doing a new thing? Or maybe you are Andrew or Peter or Philip or Nathanael, willing to become one of the first followers and to invite others along on the adventure of faith?

Finally, imagine yourself as the Ethiopian eunuch riding along in your chariot. You've been to Jerusalem to worship and you are busy reading the scriptures and trying to understand what they mean, but there is so much that you just don't understand. Then along comes Philip, at God's leading, to ask if you understand what you are reading. You admit that you don't because you need someone to guide you and Philip shares with you the good news about Jesus. As you understand more deeply, your heart is opened and when you notice some water you say "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Now, for Philip, the most natural answer before their conversation along the roadway would be that there are lots of reasons why you cannot be baptized. You're not Jewish. You come from another country. You're part of a sexual minority. But after their conversation about scripture on the road, Philip doesn't raise any of this. Instead, he gets down from the chariot with the eunuch and together they enter the water and Philip baptizes him. Philip nurtures the faith of the Ethiopian eunuch by helping to understand the scriptures and experience the good news about Jesus and the Ethiopian eunuch, in turn, expands Philip's understanding of who can be baptized. Both are changed by their encounter on the wilderness road.

Call sometimes works like that in our lives too. We started our time together today by remembering some of the people who have nurtured and inspired us in our own faith journeys. Because that's the thing. That cloud of witnesses is essential... without the family, neighbours, friends, church school teachers, youth group leaders, church camp counsellors, and ministers few of us would be sitting here today. If God's call in people's lives was just about individuals and God, we wouldn't need church. United Church members with connections to countries like Zambia, Kenya and Zimbabwe have a great word for this - Ubuntu. Ubuntu has sometimes been translated as "I am what I am because of who we all are". Ubuntu doesn't mean that the direct relationship between Samuel and God isn't important, but that it exists within the relationship of Samuel and Eli with God and with all the people.

So perhaps in addition to singing the lovely "me", "my" and "I" hymns we typically connect with stories like the ones we heard today, it's time to expand the list so that we also think of call in terms of "we" "us" and "ours" with such hymns as:

- We are pilgrims on a journey, fellow travellers on the road.
- Blest be the tie that binds, our hearts in Christian love.
- Come touch us in the moments we are fragile... that we may rise to follow and to serve.
- We shall go out with hope of resurrection.

And as we expand our thinking about these stories to include not just the relationship between the person being called and God but also the networks of relationships around them - the "we" dimensions - I pray that you will leave here today pondering how you might be called to be part of helping someone else hear God's call in their lives. Are you an Eli being called to help someone else listen for God? Are you Andrew or Peter being called to invite someone else to follow in the way of Jesus? Are you Philip or the Ethiopian eunuch being invited to help someone else to grow in faith, possibly in unexpected ways? What is your part in the 'we' that is the church?

Hymn - MV 174 "Soil of God, You and I"

(or any of the hymns listed in the last paragraphs of the sermon)

Mission and Service Story

(please check for something current and relevant at the time you use this service)

Invitation to the Offering

One: It takes all of us working together to be _____ United Church. We need _____ playing the piano/organ and _____ shovelling the snow. We need _____ baking cookies and _____ spending time with our young people. We need _____ chairing the board and _____ running the sound system. We need every single one of us - both to share as we are able and to invite and inspire others to offer their gifts as well. In that spirit, let us dedicate all our gifts of caring, of skill and of money, to help _____ United Church to continue the work of sharing the good news and tagging others to be part of what God is doing in our community and the world.

Special Music

(We have permission from Rev. Emmah Mutisi and Rev. MiYeon Kim to include one of their songs with this service. Rev. Kim is the minister at Fort Macleod-Granum Pastoral Charge in Chinook Winds Regional Council. Rev. Emmah Mutisi is a minister in the Admission process who is currently in search of an admission appointment amongst us. If you do not have a choir or are just looking for some additional special music, you may consider including one of the following pieces in your service:

- "Miranda waKandasi" by Rev. Mutisi is sung in Shona and explores the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZJ43Wd9PG4>
- "Cast Your Boat Out" by Rev. MiYeon Kim is sung in Korean and explores the story Jesus calling the fisherman <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uukXkowSGu4>

Offering Prayer

Loving God, we give thanks for our church community and all the gifts we share with one another. We ask you to bless all that we offer of our time, our talents and our resources so that we might continue to inspire others to be part of the unfolding story of faith in this time and place. Amen.

Prayers of the People

(The following is offered as a starting point for you to use if that is helpful.)

Nurturing God, we give thanks for all the people who have helped to shape and form us in the faith:

- for the gift of scripture with its rich treasury of stories about people who have tried to follow in your way
- for the people of this church who laid the foundations on which we now build
- for the family and friends, teachers and mentors who invite us to experience the love of God in our own lives
- for writers and artists, preachers and theologians, and all those who help us to think more deeply about faith and life.

Transforming God, we give thanks also for all the ways in which you call us to pass on the gifts we received

- by helping someone else to know your love
- by nurturing gifts in others that they may not see yet themselves
- by inviting someone to come and see what church is all about
- by noticing when God might be calling someone to a particular role in the life of the church

Loving God, show us how our gifts, as a church and as individuals, might meet the needs of your hurting world.

- where there is injustice, may we be part of the resistance

- where there is sorrow, may we bring comfort
- where there is hatred, may we witness to love
- where there is division, may we be creators of peace.

Now in a moment of shared silence, we offer the particular prayers of our hearts for the situations in the news, for our friends and family and neighbours, and for ourselves

We bring all our prayers, both those we have spoken aloud and those which echo in the deepest places of our hearts, and we offer them to you O God, as we doing with the great company of faithful across time and space in the words of prayer that Jesus shared with us: Our Father ...

Closing Hymn - MV 212 Sent Out in Jesus' Name

Sending Forth

The time we spend together in worship nurtures and sustains us in our faith so that we can go forth into the world to share the good news with those we meet.

So let us go forth this day as part of the great cloud of witnesses

Doing our part to spread God's love in our hurting world

And may we never forget:

That the love of God will sustain us on the way

That the example of Christ will show us how to live

And the power of the Holy Spirit will inspire us to new adventures in faith. Amen.

This service was written by Sarah Bruer, with editing by Alydia Smith and Beth Kerr. Thanks to MiYeon Kim and Emmah Mutisi for permission to include their songs as special music and to Sherpherd Munikwa and Dorcas Muketha for verifying the reference to 'ubuntu'.