The Quest for Meaning
A Sermon on First Samuel 3:1-10 and First Corinthians 12:12-31 by Rich Holmes
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By all appearances Joe and Jack are exactly the same. They both wake up every morning and have their morning coffee, they go to work, they both work full-time jobs. Joe and Jack both start out as single adults, but then they meet someone special and they start a family and they work for decades until it is time for them to retire. But the similarities between Joe and Jack end there. For Joe, as long as he is working and receiving a paycheck and as long as that paycheck is enough to feed his family he is as happy as a clam, and it really doesn’t matter what he does. Joe could be a Senator or he could shine shoes for a living, it’s all the same to him. Oh he may get bored with shining shoes or passing laws as a Senator, and then he will do something else, but as long as he can feed himself and his family with what he does, that’s basically all he cares about. And then there is Jack. Jack also cares about whether the paycheck he earns will be enough to feed himself and his family, and he cares about not being bored with what he does, but he also cares about something else, and that something else is whether what he does gives his life meaning. I have to admit to you, that at one time I was a little confused about what people meant whenever they asked “Does my life have any meaning?” Words can mean something, symbols can mean something, but how can life mean something if you are not talking about the word “life”? So, when people used to say “My life has no meaning” I often wanted to know, “What do you mean?” Later though, I came to understand that what they meant was “Does my life have a point? Does it have a purpose? Would it really matter to the world if I didn’t exist at all?” This is a question that the Jacks of the world care about, but the Joes of the world do not. So what about you, are you more of a Joe or a Jack? Or to give them
names for the female gender a Joanna, or Jackie? In my life, I have been more of a Jack than a Joe, as I have always wanted to know that what I do has some greater point, that it is in some way making the world a better place, that it matters that I exist, and as I struggled to know what this is, I have often been jealous of the Joes of this world, jealous of the people who just don’t care, because I can’t help but care.

Now, if you are a Joe or a Joanna, and you have never stopped to worry about the significance of what you do or what your place is in this world, that’s not necessarily a bad thing. If you are a Joe, and even if you are doing things to make the world a better place sometimes you might run across people who condemn you for your carefree attitude and who will say to you “Don’t you care about the cosmic importance of what you’re doing?” And they will think less of you for not caring. But I think that’s silly. At the end of the day these people are probably like me. They are probably just a little jealous of you and you should see their condemnation as nothing more than that. Jealousy. But what if you are not a Joe or a Joanna, but a Jack or a Jackie? What if you do worry about the meaning of your life and the importance of what you do, and you cannot will yourself to be a Joe or Joanna no matter how hard you try? Well, if you are a Jack or a Jackie, let me ask you this. What if you somehow knew that the God of the universe personally called you by name and told you that he wanted you to do a certain job or perform a certain task? And maybe that job or task could be to do something that was obviously big, something that the entire world knows about, or it could be something that seems incredibly insignificant, like shining shoes or bussing tables. If God called you to have that job, or to perform that task, then how could you ever think it was insignificant again? For think about it. What is it that you would immediately know about that job or that task? What
you would know is that from the beginning of time long before you were born, God had a plan for you. What you would know is that from the beginning of time, long before you were born God had a plan with your name on it, for how you would fit into his entire plan for the universe.

In our New Testament lesson for today, the apostle Paul compares the church to a body, and he tells us that just as a body has eyes and ears and a nose, the body of Christ has various parts as well. Paul’s image of the body is a rich image, maybe even an inexhaustibly rich image because even the smallest seemingly most insignificant parts of a body are indispensable for the body’s functioning. Think for example, about all the tiny parts of your eye. Each of your eyes has an iris that has muscles which expand and contract around your pupil in order to let in the proper amount of light, so that you can get enough light in the dark but not be blinded by the light in the daytime. It has a lens with muscles around it to focus on things near and far away. It has a tear duct which lubricates the eye and washes away all the dust and microscopic particles from your eye. It has an optic nerve which converts the images in your eye to an electric signal for your brain and all of these tiny, seemingly insignificant parts work together so you can see, and seeing is a part of the functioning of the whole body. It’s pretty amazing when you think about it, isn’t it?

Well, today at Northminster, we ordain Tracy Riley and Margaret Bischoff and we install Susan Hill and Dennis Yoder to be elders for this church. We do this every year for a new class of elders and every year what we claim is that they are not simply being installed as elders because they agreed to be elders or because the nominating committee really wanted them. We claim that this is their call from God. Now that doesn’t mean that they had an experience which was like what we have in our Old Testament story today in which God called Samuel by
name, it doesn’t mean that they were going along the road one day and they saw a burning bush like Moses, it doesn’t mean that God even came to them in a dream and said “Become an elder!” But I really believe they are called by God just as much as Samuel was called by God or just as much as Moses or any of the prophets were called by God. Oh sure, their lives won’t be as dramatic as Moses or Samuel’s lives and they probably won’t change history as much, but that’s okay, because as elders of this church, I really believe that they have some indispensable role to play for the kingdom of God. Just like an iris or a tearduct or a lens, they have some indispensable role to play which I believe God needed and God knew about from the beginning of time.

Today is a day to celebrate the ordination and installation of a new class of elders, but as we think about what their calls mean, it is also a day to think about what God is calling each of us to do. Now maybe you don’t think of your life that way. Maybe you are the kind of person who says “Pastor I come to this church every Sunday and I say my prayers and I give my tithes and offerings. I do everything I’m supposed to do, but what on earth do you mean to say I am called. What on earth do you mean by saying God has something for me to do?” Well, maybe you don’t think of yourself as having a call, and if not, you are not alone. When I was in Seminary there was a time when all of us gathered around to tell our call stories and I can remember a woman named Rachel said that she was basically the same way. She never thought of herself as having a call. But one day, she was listening to a sermon, just like all of you are doing now, and the pastor said these words. He said “You may not think of yourselves as being called by God, but if you really believe that God has a plan for this entire universe, if you really believe that God is working out his purposes in all things, then ask yourself why wouldn’t those
plans include you in some way? Did God make you or did someone else make you? So, why wouldn’t those plans include you?” It is rare that a single sermon will change someone’s life, but Rachel said those words and those questions changed hers, so she went home and prayed about it and decided she was being called to the ministry, and the next thing you know she dropped everything and went to Seminary and became a minister. That was almost twenty years ago, and she is still in the ministry.

No, God may not be calling you in an audible voice, and maybe not through a burning bush, but the question that pastor put to Rachel is the question that all of us have to answer: If you really believe that God has a plan for this entire universe, then why wouldn’t those plans include you in some way? Why wouldn’t they include you?

We are a body. A body not just with arms and legs, ears and eyes, but with irises, and lenses, corneas, tearducts, a body with tastebuds and sweat glands, and eardrums, a body with minute parts none of which are insignificant, all of which work together for the kingdom of God. So think about it, pray about it. What is your role to play in the body?