

Running for Help

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
October 29, 2017 ~~ Stewardship Season Third Sunday
Text: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

Sometimes we all need a little help. In fact, there are times in our lives when we need a lot of help. We know this from when we're very young, like the Baby Llama whose story we enjoyed a few moments ago. Little ones often become fearful when they are away from mom or dad, especially when it's a dark night and their beds seem like they are a long way away from where their parents are spending the evening. As anyone knows who has gone best two out of three falls when trying to put an anxious little one to bed, these situations can easily lead to the "llama drama" Momma Llama finds herself confronting. And she handles it beautifully by reassuring Baby Llama that she always loves him and is always near even if she's not right here. And Baby Llama settles himself down and goes to sleep.

The simple truth is we all need help now and then. The tough part for most of us is admitting we need help. We don't like to do this. We really don't. We're afraid people will think less of us if we admit we're struggling with something. We're afraid that if we ask for help, we still won't get it because no one will want to help us. We worry something's wrong with us because we need the help in the first place. The sad thing is that this reluctance to

ask for the help we need, the fear that we can't ask for the help we need, can become so pervasive that fear and anxiety and anger become almost palpable. I think this is very much the case in the world we find ourselves living in right now. The proof is all around us. Think about it. We are confronted every day by news of crisis after crisis: the opioid crisis, the bullying crisis, the refugee and immigration crisis, the healthcare crisis, the climate change crisis and so on and so on. We are in the midst of crisis fatigue, bombarded by these and so many other societal issues that are beyond our control in so many ways. We would like to help but what can we do? Never mind running for help, sometimes we just want to run! But we can't. The sun comes up every morning and a new day awaits. We can't just bail on life. We have to find a way to cope and that can be tough.

Difficult as it is some days the only way through life each day is to live it. The only way through a challenging, fearful, difficult situation is through it. We can ask for help. We should ask for help. Sometimes we even need to run for help. Hopefully we will find the help we need. But we will still have to face those fears, face those painful realities about ourselves and our situation and just move forward. One day at a time. One step at a time. Like taking a walk in the dark of night with only a flashlight illuminating the next step ahead of us. We move ahead one circle of light at a time. The thing is to stay focused on that circle of

light instead of the darkness all around it. Easier said than done though, right?

You might not know it but this weekend we are marking a special anniversary of someone running for help for a problem he could see but no one else would even acknowledge. The 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation will be observed this Tuesday, October 31. It was on this date that a Roman Catholic monk named Martin Luther supposedly posted a list of all the problems he saw in the church and published them by nailing his list to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Luther had no idea he was changing the course of history with his list. He had no intention of starting the Reformation at all. He was just asking for help in resolving what he saw as real and significant problems in the church. He was hoping that his list would spark a scholarly debate among the church leaders in a position to make changes and that these public disputations would lead to the resolution of at least the worst of the problems he saw in the church. But, that didn't happen. It seemed Luther hit a nerve and once he opened up this debate about reforms needed in the church, others jumped on the same bandwagon and the whole situation soon spiraled way beyond what Luther ever imagined. So, it could be argued that the Protestant Reformation happened because Luther ran for help, and didn't get it. And that's what we all fear, isn't it? We hate to ask for help because on some level, we're afraid it won't

come. Worse, we worry people will think less of us for asking. How sad is that. Good thing God always shows us a way where we can't see one on our own.

That's why I think we need to turn to the wisdom of children as we confront our fears and worries about so many things we experience every day. That's why I thought this sermon series on children's books would be fun, but also provide us a new way to think about so many things. Like today as we think about needing help, we heard about Baby Llama needing his momma and how she responded. Yes, he was afraid she wouldn't respond. Yes, he was afraid she was gone. This is a developmental stage in very young children who fear their loved ones literally disappear when they are not in sight. What's real to them is what they can see and touch, hear and smell and taste. But, as they grow, they learn that life is more than what is immediately surrounding them. They learn that momma doesn't cease to exist when she is out of sight. This is in fact the lesson Baby Llama learns in this sweet book we read this morning. But Baby Llama still needed help figuring this out and that's just what Mama Llama did for him. Truth is, we all need someone to help us figure things out sometime. We all need someone we can run to for help when we need it.

This is the lesson we find in this morning's story from the Old Testament. Samuel was a little boy about 6 or 7 years old who found himself living in the Temple with the High Priest Eli. He

was in this situation because Samuel had literally been given to God by his parents in thanksgiving for his birth. His mother Hannah had been barren for a long time. She would go to the Temple to pray for a child, promising that if God would give her a son, she would return him to God in service to the Temple. She kept her promise so this little boy found himself living in a lonely religious center instead of a loving home. I can't even imagine what that must have been like for him, and I wonder how many nights he felt like the Baby Llama wanting his mama. But that's not the point of this story.

We don't know how old Samuel was when he heard this strange voice calling him in the dark of night. It's unclear from the text how long he had been with Eli at this point, but it must have been long enough that he trusted Eli and knew he was someone to whom he could turn for help. What's fascinating in this story is that God literally calls Samuel's name. Not once, not twice but three times and each time Samuel ran to Eli, sure it was Eli who had called him. But it wasn't. It's also noteworthy that it took this happening three times before Eli figured out it was God and told Samuel how to respond. Eli hadn't had this experience in a long time but he knew the response needed and explained it to the boy. Samuel knew just what to say the next time he heard the voice : "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

Speak Lord, for your servant is listening. What simple yet powerful words! And yet not surprising that Eli had to explain to Samuel that this should be his response. Interesting to note here is that Samuel wasn't going to Eli to ask for help. He thought Eli was calling him for help. Three times he heard the voice and three times he thought Eli needed help from him so he went without hesitation. It was Eli who had the experience to figure out that it was Samuel who needed the help. It was Samuel who was having this incredible experience of a direct encounter with God. Samuel went to Eli to offer help but he was the one who needed help without even realizing it. Eli offered it and Samuel was on his way to being one of the key figures of the Hebrew people, the one whom God entrusted with anointing the first king of Israel. It would seem then, that running for help and offering help can be two sides of the same coin.

Speak Lord, for your servant is listening. These are the words which unlocked the mysterious voice in the night dilemma for a little boy finding his way in a very strange place. Offering help turned out to be the best way, maybe the only way, for Samuel to receive the help he didn't even know he needed. Speak Lord, for your servant is listening. How might these words unlock your fears and guide you to the help you need for whatever challenges you face in your life, whatever fears you harbor deep in your heart?

God, I'm scared. The news on the TV is worse every day. Is something really bad going to happen? Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.

God, I'm worried. Things are uncertain here at work and what will I do if my job goes away? Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.

God, I'm tired. I feel like there is always one more thing to do and one more thing to worry about. How do I let go of my worries and find some peace? Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.

God, I feel like there's something I could be doing to make a difference in my life and the lives of others. But I don't know what that could be. I don't know how to figure it out. Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.

This, dear friends, is a way of running for help and inviting God into your life in a direct way. It's a different spin on what we usually think of as taking our problems and worries to God in prayer. By offering up our joys and concerns, our worries and our fears, we are turning to God for help, that's true. But by adding those words at the end of our prayers – Speak Lord, for your servant is listening – we are doing more than asking for help. We are telling God we are willing to be part of God's plan for responding to our prayers. We reminding ourselves that God IS part of the situation already, whatever it is. We are reminding

ourselves that asking God for help is not a one and done. We can't ask for help and walk away. Asking God for help is a process that we must be a part of if it's going to work. Just like Samuel and Eli. Just like Baby Llama and Mama Llama.

I need help God. We need help God. You know it. We know it. But, what should we do? What can we do? Where is that next circle of light we can step into, God? Speak Lord, for your servant is listening. Well, we're trying to, and that's a start. Amen.