

Our reading this morning comes from 1 Samuel Chapter 3, verses 1-20. Listen now for the Word of the Lord:

“Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, ‘**Samuel! Samuel!**’ and he said, ‘**Here I am!**’ and ran to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ But he said, ‘**I did not call; lie down again.**’ So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, ‘**Samuel!**’ Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘**Here I am, for you called me.**’ But he said, ‘**I did not call, my son; lie down again.**’ Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘**Here I am, for you called me.**’ Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, ‘Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”’ So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, ‘**Samuel! Samuel!**’ And Samuel said, ‘**Speak, for your servant is listening.**’ Then the Lord said to Samuel, ‘See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house for ever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering for ever.’

Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. **Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli.** But Eli called Samuel and said, ‘Samuel, my son.’ He said, ‘Here I am.’ Eli said, ‘What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.’ So Samuel told

him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, 'It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.'

As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord." ***This is the Word of the Lord...thanks be to God.***

So, I am getting ready to tread on some rather dangerous ground at the outset of my message this morning. First: I am "quazi" about to break a rule of mine. Second, I am about to lift up a person who, it seems, is a rather controversial figure right now, and third: a person who used to represent an organization that I am fairly sure is not very well liked in this neck of the woods.

Now, the rule I'm about to stray from, is one I made with myself when I first decided to become a Preacher. And that rule is to avoid the over-use of Sports for sermon illustrations. Now, I don't think I have actually used sports in my sermons very often, so I am nowhere near that threshold. But I cannot tell you the number of times I have sat in pews and heard really great scripture messages with wonderful theological backgrounds...only to have them, time and time again, make that turn into a story about an athlete or a coach. Frankly, I have heard it so often that I kinda got burned out on it. And, secondly, I've always wondered how many people in the pews can really relate to Sports stories: especially Football, Baseball, and Basketball, but...I will admit...in this town... it's probably quite a few.

Now, before you right me off for this statement, let me tell you that I am a fairly avid fan of several sports: mainly football, and a growing interest in Soccer because of my son's own

interest. I keep up with Baseball, a little bit of College basketball, and I can take a nap through a Golf match or NASCAR race with the best of them.

But another reason I have some level of avoidance of sports in sermons is that all the good sports stories seem to have drifted away. **The reason in my mind is money.** It is on some levels “disgusting” the amount of money that we pump into sports these days...Pro and College football being the worst. Gone for the most part are the days of the coaches that desired first and foremost to build character in their players...I mean how can you... if you live in a constant condition of “Win or Get fired” by pressure from Alumni, fans, or Administrators. Winning has become a new cult in the American sports arena...it is everything...everything revolves around it...and we will do almost anything to make it happen...even cheat. If you win...people love you (unless of course you win too much...then they hate you...let’s just say its complicated). If you loose...people will turn their backs on you and eventually abandon you...if you lose often enough. **So, if you are coaching a major level organization, how do you find time to build character in your players...when what you have to have are winners?**

Read the headlines these days and they are filled with unscrupulous players making under the table deals with overzealous and equally unscrupulous alumni at the college level, or pro players living off the field lives fraught with over indulgence and in some cases... felony offenses. **And these are not mid level athletes making these headlines...these are the ELITE of the ELITE. The BEST our sports programs can produce in this modern era...individuals of high, high talent and skill but uncertain morale character. With the exception...at least for now...of one individual.**

Now, since my arrival here I have made the mistake on two occasions of wearing the color combination of Blue and Orange. One time was at Lewis Herndon's house when I paired an Orange shirt with blue running shorts. For a minute, I thought I was going to have to fight my way out of that one. The other was here at church when I wore a blue shirt with an orange tie and on my way to lead worship I got a withering look from someone who assumed that I was expressing my allegiance to the University of Florida, of which, I have none. I just thought it made a nice match when I was looking through the closet that morning.

So the one I am referring to is ...and I'll wait for the sighs and rolling eyes...Tim Tebow.

Now, if you don't know who he is...and some of you may not...Tebow was a Quarterback for the University of Florida, and he won both a Heisman Trophy and one National Championship while he was sharing Quarterback time with a Senior, and another when he was the sole QB.

Tebow went into the NFL and was drafted by the Denver Broncos two years ago and has been a rather controversial figure primarily because his style of play is not typical for an NFL quarterback. This past year in fact, his development at his position was so bad that he was moved, at one point, to 3rd string Quarterback after having come into the pre-season as the potential starter. Tebow even has some statistics on his passing ability that would put any number of NFL quarterbacks out of work. And Tebow, after miraculously becoming the starter this past fall, has lost some games where his offense had almost no points and next to no yardage.

But Tebow, even more miraculously, has helped turned his team around this season from last in their division to first and earned them a spot in the NFL playoffs, which ended last.

So, despite all his bad stats and his poor play, Tebow does have the ability to win football games despite all the odds ...and to inspire his teammates around him to do the same.

BUT...that is not the story for today.

There are plenty of winners to gloat about in the NFL...the NFL is full of winners...as I mentioned before...and frankly whether they are winners or not does not tell us anything about their character because most of the winners in major, money infested sports today have or are in the process of selling their souls for the glory and the money. And frankly...it might all get to Tim Tebow one day too, because players at that level are dealing with temptations on a scale that you and I cannot possibly imagine.

Now the other thing about Tebow, which is also part of the controversy swirling around him, is his open and outspoken witness to Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Many of you know...that this goes beyond the gentle point to the sky after a touchdown to a literal prayer on one knee giving thanks to God (now termed as Tebowing) and then it carries itself right into the press conference where national reporters will hear him start every interview off by thanking his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ before answering any questions. And this is exactly what he did when he accepted the Heisman Trophy in 2008, as my 5 year old son and I sat watching it on TV.

Tim Tebow is an outspoken and unashamed witness to Jesus Christ. And I am going to tell you that theologically, he can tread on some slippery ground if you read all of what Jesus said about praying in public, but for the most part he is doing exactly what all of us are

supposed to be doing, which is using our lives as a witness to Christ in everything we say and do. **But even that is not why this story is of importance this morning.**

What I do want to talk about is how I have seen Tim Tebow respond to questions from reporters on two different occasions. One, was after an amazing 4th Quarter comeback win and the other was after a humiliating loss based solely on his poor performance. On each occasion Tebow said “I am just blessed to have this opportunity to play professional football so that I can use it as a platform to talk about...” and then he proceeded to give the name of an individual who was waiting for him after the game... to meet with him personally and spend time with him. And on both occasions these individuals were kids or young adults who are, and have been living with terminal illnesses for most of their lives. One of which, the one he was going to meet after his embarrassing loss, has had had 72 surgeries in her lifetime. Can you imagine going through 72 surgeries?

Partnering with the **Dreams Come True** foundation, Tebow’s WISH program makes dreams come true for kids who not only get to meet him but spend real time with him, right after he walks out of an NFL locker room...right after an intense game...win or lose.

And Tebow tells national media people who want him to talk about everything but **THAT**...that **THAT** is the real thing. That God has given him this platform not to become to the “winningest” player in NFL history, not to become the richest player in NFL history, not to become the most famous player in NFL history...but to use all of that as a platform to enable his work (among the many other things he does) to give terminally ill kids a dream come true.

For **this** reason, I would argue that Tim Tebow, no matter what you think about him, has something we all need...**and that is clarity. Not clarity about our futures, or clarity about how God will take care of us in the coming years...but clarity of purpose...actually clarity FOR purpose...a clear view of God's purpose for us in our own lives.** Clarity in how God is using our exact situations right now...no matter how difficult... not for our own benefit...but for the benefit of His calling for our lives. (Shift)

Now Samuel, lay sleeping in the Holy of Holies...the most sacred of rooms in the Temple, the place where the ark of the covenant was kept. And he kept hearing a voice call his name...and it was trying to wake him up. And he kept responding correctly "Here I am" but he was going to the wrong person. Everything he was trying to do was right, but Eli was not calling him. But eventually it was Eli who helped Samuel see who was calling him, and when he did...he had clarity. And he understood exactly what he was supposed to do. And I can tell you right now...it was not pretty. First, Samuel had to tell Eli that God was going to punish him. And secondly, Samuel would go on to be one of the most famous Prophets in Israel...a job of personal witness to God's will that no one really wants because prophets generally tell people what they don't want to hear. Instead they tell people what they need to hear or more importantly, what God wants them to hear. And for this they usually suffer ridicule, and loss, as people try to tear them down.

So if Tebow and Samuel are any indication...being a vocal and outspoken witness for God... is tough work. And the higher up the chain you move...the higher your platform is raised so that all the nation can see your witness...you will come under higher and higher

levels of scrutiny and criticism. But the story that Samuel and Tebow share is that they do it anyway. They accept, and do not shy away from the fact that God has called them to tell the nations about Him, and to show his love for the sick and the burdened, and yes even the losers... whom the demanding fans will always cast aside.

Samuel did not want to tell Eli God's word to him, but he did. And Eli knew he needed to hear it. Tebow, I can only imagine, does not want millions of people making fun of him for his devout faith, but he lives it out any way because somewhere there is a five year old child sitting on their parent's lap that NEEDS TO SEE IT...and somewhere there is a terminally ill patient sitting in a hospital room or at home, who has a dream and needs an inspiration.

Clarity...of purpose. Clarity... **For** purpose. And, how can we, like Eli, help each other listen for God's calling in our own lives? And how can we like Samuel...have the courage to live it out once we know?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit...Amen.

Invite you to stand and affirm our faith as we read from the Confession of 1967, from the Presbyterian Church's Book of Confessions:

The church disperses to serve God wherever its members are, at work or play, in private or in the life of society. Their prayer and Bible study are part of the church's worship and theological reflection. Their witness is the church's evangelism. Their daily action in the world is the church in mission to the world. The quality of their relation with other persons is the measure of the church's fidelity. Each member is the church in the world, endowed by the Spirit with some gift of ministry and is responsible for the integrity of their witness in their own particular situation. The church gathers to praise God, but disperses to serve.