

You Are Called

1 Samuel 3:1-20

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Let us pray: Gracious God, in an age of disorder, when your word seems rare and we so long to see you, give us eyes to see, ears to hear you call us by name, and courage to deliver your word, that we may help usher in an age in which your word prevails over all. Help us to be like Samuel, ready to answer your call, prepared to transform your world. Amen.

Yesterday before the memorial service for Lucille Miner, I got to chat for a few minutes with Lucille's beautiful granddaughter, Sarah. We talked about various things: music, school, family, and then she asked very frankly, "So, what made you decide to become a minister?"

I have to admit that sometimes these are not instinctively my most pastoral moments. It feels like I have answered the 'call' question about 1,000 times, especially as I have just completed the long and sometimes arduous United Methodist ordination process. As a result, sometimes when people ask about my call story, I kind of want to roll my eyes and say, "Really? Isn't there something else you'd like to know?" But thankfully in this instance, with this gifted young woman beside me, God's grace overtook my snobbery and I simply gave the shortest version of my call story I know: "There just came a point in my life when I couldn't imagine doing anything else." And that is the truth. Of course, my call – like yours – is ongoing and always changing. And when I discerned my *professional* call for the first time, when it was all happening, it was more complicated than that. But when you get down to basics, it's simple: God called me by name, again and again. Eventually, I took a risk and listened, and then I said, at some point in time, "yes. Here I am."

There are so many great call stories in the Bible: Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Sarah, Elizabeth, and Mary. In all of these, God says, in the words of Isaiah 43, "I have called you by

name and you are mine.” In all of them, there’s some hesitation but God persists in calling. And in all of these, someone eventually says, “Yes. Here I am.” This morning we have heard the call of Samuel. It’s such a dramatic story, and so charming in so many ways. But in the end, it, too, is simple: a young boy hears God calling him by name, again and again, and eventually he says, “Yes.”

The boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under the old priest, Eli. “The word of the Lord was rare in those days;” it says. “Visions were not widespread.” Samuel slept in the heart of the temple, the holy of holies, next to the ark of the covenant, both to make sure that the ark was safe and to keep the perpetual flame from going out. Eli would have slept by the door, near the outside. During the night, Samuel hears someone calling his name not once, not twice, but three times, and each time he goes and wakes his elderly mentor, wondering what he wants, how he can help. The kind old priest sends him back to bed each time, and finally realizes that *God* is calling the boy, so he gives him wise counsel about responding to God and sends Samuel back to his bed to wait for God to call again.

Then the story goes that God came to Samuel and stood there with him, calling as before – now the fourth time – calling him by name, “Samuel, Samuel.” And finally Samuel says, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” This is a tender moment when God comes near and speaks to the boy not in thunder or fire or whirlwind, but with love and patience. God has come to the unlikeliest of servants, this boy who responds openheartedly, vulnerably, willing to hear whatever God might say.

One of the things I love most about Samuel’s call story is that it happens in community. What if Eli hadn’t been there? What if Samuel hadn’t thought to listen to him – he was awfully

old, after all. Or what if Eli had been jealous that God was speaking to Samuel and not him, the seasoned religious professional, and as a result had not given him such wise counsel? But I think that's the way it happens most of the time: call is discerned, for all of us, in community. We can't always recognize or understand God's voice when it comes, even when it's calling our names. After all, Eli's sight had grown dim, and Samuel did not yet know the Lord, but together, they figured out what God was saying.

Frederick Buechner has famously said that your vocation, your calling, is where your deep hunger and the world's deep need intersect. I think that's a beautiful image, but it's too impractical for me. It's a lot easier to define your own deep hunger than the world's deep need, for one. And I don't know about you, but my hunger seems to change a lot, even if it stays in the same general arena. For me it's more helpful to think about your vocation, literally what God is calling you into, as "an urging in your gut that won't go away that is also confirmed in some place other than your gut." I think about young Samuel in the temple in the middle of the night: how did he know he wasn't dreaming when God came and stood by him and gave him this difficult message to share? He needed Eli to confirm what he was hearing. This is why the ordination process in our church involves so many people – and because we're Methodist, they're organized into committees – the community is looking to confirm what each individual candidate has heard or felt on his or her own. The gut feeling on its own might just be indigestion, after all. But when God's patient voice comes to us like it came to Samuel, not in a fire or a whirlwind or an earthquake, it takes a community – and an intergenerational community, at that – to confirm whose voice is calling and to figure out what God is really saying to us.

I also find it interesting that Samuel, consecrated to God's work from the time he was in his mother's womb, wasn't out carousing in the village pub or playing soccer with his buds when God's voice came to him. He was in the church. And I know I'm pretty biased toward this whole thing, but did anyone else notice that when Samuel came out to Eli, at the door of the temple, he had to go back into the sanctuary, the holy of holies, to meet God? God came and talked to him *in the church*, even though the church was broken, even though the church was in an area where the word of God was rare and visions were not widespread. God came into the heart of the church to meet Samuel. I'm just gonna let y'all take that one home and think about it.

But where I want us to be careful with Samuel's story is when we start looking for ourselves in it. It's easy for us to read this, especially to verse 10, and go away inspired, thinking, "Okay, when God calls *me* by name, I know what to say, 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening!'" And we might go to sleep at night and wake up in the morning and think, "Well, I didn't hear it last night - maybe tomorrow!" And while God *does* call each of us, and Samuel's response is a good one for us to remember, the way it happened for Samuel is just not how it always happens.

I had friends in college and seminary who, when telling their call stories, had these short, sweet, sure stories of visions and dreams, of absolute confidence at a certain, dramatic point in time that God was calling them by name, asking them to be fill-in-the-blank-here, and they have never looked back. But it's not always like that. We imagine that God called Samuel in a big, booming, James Earl Jones voice, but the Scripture doesn't say God **called** to Samuel, and God doesn't always **call** to us. Sometimes God *calls* us. If you haven't had a dramatic get-

up-in-the-middle-of-the-night experience with God, it doesn't mean God isn't calling you by name. Persistently. Because I'll tell you this with full confidence, my friends, that God *is* calling us by name, every one of us. You are called.

Now you may not be called to professional ordained ministry, but that doesn't mean you aren't called, either. So often when we talk about "call," we mean full-time Christian service, but *everyone* is called, not just pastors. And call isn't just about choosing a career, anyway. Samuel ended up being the last of the judges, ushering in the age of monarchy in Israel, consecrating the first great kings in Saul and David. Samuel was arguably the greatest religious leader of his time, changing the course of history forever, but he didn't get all that information in the temple that night: God didn't even say, "Samuel, you're going to be a prophet. That is your call." All God told Samuel was the message to give Eli the next day. That's it. God gave Samuel the *next step*, and Samuel took it. That is our task as disciples and our task as a church: not to figure out where we might *end up someday*, but to discern what God is calling us to do *next*, the next step, and then to have the courage to do that thing, however difficult or unpopular it may be.

The lectionary offers this reading once every three years, but cuts it in half, suggesting just reading verses 1-10. It's more dramatic that way, building up through the progression of God calling Samuel's name again and again and finally Samuel responding, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening!" "Hooray!" we think. "Good job, Samuel! You figured it out!" We smile and move on, and we rarely read further to see how difficult Samuel's calling will be.

But ending at verse 10 also robs us of the dramatic transformation that happens in this one chapter of Scripture. This part gives me chills every time. Do you remember how 1 Samuel

3 began? “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” But then Samuel answers God’s call to take that one next step, and at the end of the chapter, in verse 21, we read, “The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh...” and the first verse of chapter 4: “And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.” Did you catch that transformation? The word of the Lord was rare and visions were not widespread... then one little boy heard God calling his name and said, “Yes,” and the word of God came through him to all Israel. In the middle of trouble, God raised up a prophet. In a world bent on ignoring God’s word, God spoke again. One little boy was called, and he listened, and it changed everything.

God is calling you, too. Calling you by name, over and over, just waiting patiently for you to discern in this community what God is asking you to do – not the whole future but the next step. What if you opened yourself up to hear that call? What if we all did? And what if we said “yes?” It would change everything. It just might transform the world.

Amen.