

FIRST LESSON: 1 Samuel 3:1-10
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 9: 9-12
January 14, 2024

“God Is Calling”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

The following is a translation of a sign posted in a church in France: When you enter this church it may be possible that you will hear the call of God. However, it is unlikely he will call you on your mobile cell phone. Thank you for turning off your phones. If you want to talk to God, enter, choose a quiet place, and talk to him. If you want to see God, send him a text while driving.

What does it mean to be called by God? Matthew the tax collector was able to hear God directly because he encountered God in incarnate form. Jesus spoke to him! But for the rest of us divine guidance can be much more murky.

The child Samuel in our Old Testament reading became the mighty prophet Samuel. His mother Hannah dedicated him to God. She had been unable to conceive and in exchange for being given a child, she gave the child into God’s service. She took Samuel when he was a young boy to live and work with the priest Eli at the Temple at Shiloh. There was no Jerusalem temple at this point in history. This was very early in the life of the people of God. Moses and Joshua had been strong leaders, but after settlement things began to fracture. For a time, the people were led by a series of judges who kept order and guided the nation as a whole, but it was not an organized nation. It was really a group of tribes, and tribal wars threatened to tear things apart. Life in the promised land was not harmonious. A quick read through the books of Joshua and Judges shows just how chaotic things were. There was no king and no central government. The spiritual leadership at Shiloh was flawed. The prophetic voice of God among the people had been silent for a very long time. So God intervened.

We don’t know how old Samuel was when he was brought to the temple, or indeed how old he was at the point at which God spoke to him, but he was a boy not a man, which means under the age of 13. While these arrangements might be strange today they were not then. Samuel could have arrived when he was between three and five. At the point of this encounter he might have been anywhere between eight and twelve. Scripture does say earlier that he had grown in stature, so he was not a very young child, but since he is described as a boy, he was not an adult.

The elderly Eli took good care of his young charge. Unfortunately, he had not done as good a job with his two sons because they were corrupt. They helped themselves to the temple offerings and did not honor God in their behavior. Their failure, and Eli's, was to have a devastating effect on Israel. But that was not the issue right here. Right here we have the call of young Samuel.

Samuel was sleeping in the temple where the Ark of the Covenant was. The Ark of the Covenant was a chest made of acacia wood overlaid with gold. It was 45 inches by 27 inches large, and contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments, Aaron's rod and a golden urn filled with manna. The top of the Ark was designed as a throne for the invisible God with two cherubim as guards. The ark was the holiest object in Israel. It was believed to be where God's presence actually dwelt. And it was captured by the Philistines not too many years later when the temple was overrun. The Philistines returned it when plague broke out in their cities and they attributed it to the anger of the god of the Ark. It disappeared from history permanently during a later conquest. Of course, if you've ever seen "Raiders of the Lost Ark" you'll have a good visual along with some spectacular special effects that have nothing to do with scripture. The point is that Samuel was sleeping in the presence of God. Eli was not. Eli's sons were definitely NOT. And the boy heard a voice calling him.

Attuned to being at Eli's beck and call, particularly as the now very elderly priest could not see well and often needed help, Samuel got up promptly and went to ask Eli what he needed. Three times Samuel heard the call and went to Eli saying, "Here I am; you called me," and three times Eli turned him away, explaining that he had not called him. But the third time it occurred to Eli what was really happening, and so he told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" And that is what Samuel did.

This is where our lectionary reading ends, which is a little unfair because the word of the Lord that came to Samuel was not an easy one to deliver. It was a word of judgement against Eli and his family for corruption. Eli had been kind to Samuel, and he did not want to give him this word. But Eli was insistent, and Samuel did end up telling him what God had said. We all claim we want to hear from God, but we don't always want to hear the message. In this case it was a truth that was hard to bear.

I cannot imagine how terrifying it must have been for young Samuel to have heard and replied to the voice, saying, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." This was God, speaking directly to him. And clearly in this instance we are talking about an audible voice. Eli's grown sons were from the priestly line. Samuel was a nobody. He had no inherited status. He wasn't even an adult. Children have little status in our world and no status at all in that world. And yet God spoke to Samuel.

Samuel became a mighty prophet. That is not an easy calling. A prophet has to tell people things they probably don't want to hear. A prophet is at the beck and call of God at all times. A prophet is a leader, and as such is always the target of criticism. Finding fault with leaders is a favorite human pastime. Even the best of leaders have critics. I could never be a politician. I find it hard enough being a pastor. Only some of you are ticked off at me at any given time.

But those who speak with a prophetic voice can have enemies from every direction, because they cross over from the spiritual to the social and political reality of life. Prophets call out injustice and hypocrisy. And as uncomfortable as it is, the church itself is called to exercise this type of prophetic role.

There are churches and individuals who glory publicly claiming that they are being “persecuted” for speaking a prophetic word against culture—a word that condemns gays and abortion and trans people. They brag about being condemned for condemning others. But I find it very interesting that Jesus was opposed for the opposite reason. Jesus was opposed for opening doors to the people the religious establishment hated. Jesus did not come to condemn the world, and it was his radical inclusivity that offended people. As a congregation we should not be afraid of being condemned for loving and accepting everyone, because we are doing what Jesus did. That is a true form of prophetic ministry.

God calls us. But unlike Matthew, we don’t have the benefit of encountering God in incarnate form. God calls us. But unlike Samuel, we don’t hear an audible voice. If we did our friends and family would be asking for a psychiatric evaluation. But there are still principles we can glean from this scripture.

First of all, Samuel did not initially recognize that it was God who called him. And that is true of all of us. We may not hear God audibly, but we do sometimes get a clear sense of inward call about things. *I’m supposed to take this job . . . or, that doesn’t feel right, something’s wrong here . . . or, God wants me to help this person . . . or, God wants me to entirely change my vocation.* Calls are not just to the ministry. Calls take many different forms, right down to the day-to-day reality of being where we are needed by others when they need us. And sometimes, particularly when it is a big decision, we need to test it out. We need to go to others we trust and get their input. Eli finally figured out what was going on and told Samuel what to do.

Secondly, who God calls is quite often not who the world would call. Matthew was a despised tax collector. Samuel was a child. Our background and current life circumstances are not what matters to God. What matters to God is the heart. What matters is that Matthew got up immediately and followed Jesus. What matters is Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

Each of us individually are called by God to serve God in different ways. And as the body of Christ we are called to serve Christ together at Penn Wynne. But we’re not always clear on what that calling is. Our lives get crowded with other things. Economic survival, complex relationships, the demands of family life, worry over what is happening politically in our nation, and for many of us, intense concern about what is happening in Israel and Gaza because we have close ties there. Our daily routines and the constant noise in the background of the news and social media crowd out any thought of God. Life becomes one long “to-do” list as we hurry from one thing to the next without any thought of what God would have us do. But God is still calling, and we need to take time to listen. A long time ago, before many of you were even here, we did a program in the church where one of the activities was to spend an entire day asking God what God wanted us to do before every action or decision no matter how small.

Virginia, our organist at the time, had redone her kitchen and was putting it all back together again. But this time instead of placing things where they had always been, she prayed before placing each item. Her kitchen ended up completely reorganized. Nothing was where it had been before and she liked it much better! If we want our lives to be worthwhile, to make the world a better place and to do what God would have us do, we need to stop, pray and listen. It may not be necessary to ask for divine guidance before every action, but we don't ask nearly enough. Amen.

1 Samuel 3:1-10

3 The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.

2 One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. **3** The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was.**4** Then the Lord called Samuel.

Samuel answered, "Here I am." **5** And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

6 Again the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

"My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

7 Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

8 A third time the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. **9** So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

10 The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Matthew 9: 9-12

9 As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

10 While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. **11** When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

12 On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. **13** But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

