

"Please, Call Again"
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I Samuel 3:1-20, Psalm 139

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Prayer of Invocation

God of Holy Disruptions, help us to be ready for the unexpected and to allow your Spirit freedom with us in our worship. Wake up our drowsy souls and speak your challenging words into our complacency. Enable us to respond to your vision and your call to the mission of carrying your love into the world in the name of Christ. Amen.

The Word

I Samuel 3:1-20

Samuel's call: 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 forever, 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 forever."

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 Eli 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.

Living the Word

Sermon time can be used in many different ways. I am told that some pastors scream, shout and pound on the pulpit. While this tactic, may keep everyone awake, it is not one that I feel real comfortable with. I prefer to have some moments of enlightenment, or at least learning, a relation to the Holy Scriptures, and something for you to take home to process and ponder.

How you receive what I say, is up to you, but I often begin with a prayer inviting the Holy Spirit to open our hearts to what God wants us to hear. Through Bible study, I hope you will find your place in the story. We will see. The facts of the story we know from the scripture before us is that the Ark of God is in the care of Eli. Samuel, a child is also in Eli's care. They are both laying down in separate areas. Samuel hears a voice calling

him, he goes to Eli ready to serve. This happens three times before Eli understands that it is God calling Samuel and he directs him to stay and listen.

Samuel does listen and God foretells something that will happen in the future. The next morning, Eli wants to know what God has said. Samuel was afraid to share what he had heard, but Eli threatens him if he won't tell. So he does share that the Lord says he will punish the house of Eli because of his sons and Eli's lack of control over them. Eli accepted God's word through Samuel. The Lord stayed with Samuel and everyone knew him as a trustworthy prophet of God.

When I do Bible Study, I begin by reading the scripture over several times. The second or third time through I underline the words or phrases that I find interesting. For instance: "The word of the Lord was rare, visions were not widespread." So the people of that time were not hearing God. Was God being silent or had the people forgotten how to listen?

Could this verse be said again today? Is the word of the Lord rare? Are the visions few? Yet "the lamp of the Lord had not gone out." Sometimes today the wick may flicker and sputter and look like it will die, but God is awake and ready for us to listen. What an odd, somewhat stinging observation, that God's voice is so unexpected in the Temple.

After the Lord has called Samuel twice, the scripture says "Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him." You might think that Samuel, hanging out at the Temple might know the Lord and the word of the Lord. Yet, we all have revelations at different times in our life journey.

John Wesley came from a very religious family, generations of pastors. He and his brother Charles, continued the pattern and went to Oxford for seminary training. They both served churches and even went on a mission trip together from England to America to convert 'the savage Indians.' Though that trip wasn't fruitful for John and his ministry, he came back to England and continued a pursuing ministry.

After all of that something still seemed missing from his faith. It was one night as he listened to the scriptures being read that he felt his 'heart strangely warmed' and in that moment he knew that Christ had died even for him. His preaching and ministry then began to hold a new depth of meaning. He began servant ministry beyond the church doors. That of course is where the Methodist Church really began.

For Samuel, this was the night of his revelation. In the silent dawn of the Temple, the child Samuel hears God's persistent call. God finally stood before Samuel and was made know to him. God's persistence prompts Samuel's response and we learn that Samuel becomes a trustworthy prophet of the Lord. When we keep seeking God's voice, God speaks. Sometimes I think it is even more difficult for us 'churchy people' to hear God, because we are so busy 'doing church.' I pray that we can all hear God when God calls to our hearts. It is good news that God calls more than once...

The next line that caught my attention was at the end of this story: "As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground." Just as Eli listened to Samuel's word from God, and knew it was of God; the Lord continued to use Samuel to speak to the people, and they heard. When you hear a word said to be from God, can you tell by the person delivering it if it is the Lord's word or that of a false prophet? That is something worth processing and weighing...

Now I would move on to a character study of each of those in the story. This includes my perceptions and some historical facts to put the story in context.

Eli – So much of our modern communication happens without the benefit of human face-to-face contact. We may miss the nuances of human dialogue such as tone of voice, facial expression and body language. Emoji's in texts and e-mail exchanges we have devised various ways to express the feelings that the words alone may not convey.

I wonder about Eli's tone of voice and facial expression. Did it change or intensify each time Samuel came back to him? Did he reveal some frustration or tiredness with Samuel? Eli, though blind in more way than one, is still able to help Samuel see God.

What about the message he receives from God through Samuel? Eli's sons have been using their status as priests to satisfy their own desires. Alright Eli, you asked for it...Yet the message is not directed to be delivered as judgment. Instead it is given by God to pave the way for Samuel's step up in leadership, where Eli's sons have failed to be God's priests for the people.

For Samuel to grow into the leadership means that Eli must confront the failures of himself and his sons. While Eli has failed to pass on faithfulness to his own flesh and blood, he now serves as a spiritual parent for his young charge, Samuel. The elder priest accepts the words as the trustworthy words of a prophet.

Samuel, is thought to be about age 13 at this time. Samuel is initially obedient to the call; even when Samuel first hears the call he responds to it immediately, submitting himself for service to the priest. When he allows himself to listen to God – God speaks. But it isn't a great message that he hears. God tells Samuel the charges against his beloved teacher.

So when Eli asks to hear the message, Samuel tells him everything, though he knows it is a message that will hurt. When Samuel hears God's message, he is able to speak truth to Eli, the authority figure in his life. He needs to share the message with Eli as he doesn't understand the message on his own, but Eli knows the truth of it. This story of Samuel's calling establishes his authority.

Samuel became the last of the Hebrew Judges and the first of the major prophets who began to prophesy inside the Land of Israel. He was at the edge between two eras. According to the text of the Books of Samuel, he also anointed the first two kings of the Kingdom of Israel: Saul and David. While Samuel has followed God's call with the obedience of a child, we are adults who must decide what we wish to do when called by God.

God –In a bit of Jewish humor God keeps calling 'Sam-u-el,' which means 'God has heard.' This was the name given to Samuel by his mother who was thought to be unable to have children and who prayed for a son, promising God that she would give him to serve the church if her prayers were answered. Samuel's name fit him throughout his servant-hood to God.

What about God's voice? I'd like to think that in this case, God's voice was steady, strong, and filled with patient persistence. God instructs Samuel first to listen. Through the ages, God has called repeatedly for prophets and disciples. God persists in establishing and intimate relationship with perspective disciples. From these relationships (then and now) come committed visionary actions. Thank heavens God calls and calls again.

God speaks of plans of 'tingle quality.' Not the tingle you get when the car fishtail on the ice, those tingles are usually received out of fear, but what this story tells us is that we should begin to make decisions out of the 'tingle of hope.' Like Wesley's 'heart strangely warmed' we need to hear when God is ready to do a new thing in us and in the community of faith.

When we listen sometimes God uses us as prophets as well. My first churches were at Birchwood and Exeland, WI. As a new pastor, I was praying for God to use me in these churches. One Sunday I had ready, one of my 'warm, fuzzy sermons,' you know the ones where everyone goes home feeling good about themselves and their neighbors.

Part way through my first delivery, at Birchwood, my tone of voice changed and I spoke the words before me, but in a much sterner voice than how I had written it to go. A gentleman toward the back, didn't like what he heard, as though I was singling out him. He got up and walked out. I was pretty shook by this event. In fact I cried as I drove to the second church, apologizing to God for what I had done.

Half way there I realized that God had used me to make a specific point in the sermon that morning. Then I was angry, as I railed "Wait Lord, you used me!" Now I will have to live with the repercussions from this family. Thanks a lot! I don't ever stay angry very long and by the time I had gotten to the second church I was laughing at myself. I had asked God to use me, and God did, but not how I wanted to be used...

Us - So the last character study for this story is of us as disciples. There is risk in opening ourselves to serve God. Verses 11-20 speak to what might happen as a result of saying 'yes' to God's call. We may come across situations like Samuel's, where we must say difficult things to people that we deeply care about in our congregations and communities.

Disciples come in all sizes and shapes. Those who are called may be whole or broken, young or old. It seems that when God calls, God knows them all, and knows all about them. Psalm 139, shares the completeness with which we are known by God. There is comfort in that, as we have nothing to hide and our relationship with God can be open and honest. Listen to this:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you... Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

When our relationship is connected to God, we can hear that call. Then we need to work on our relationships with others. Just as Eli and Samuel had to trust each other enough to depend on each other for help, we need to work with others to keep becoming disciples.

Two months ago was Martin Luther King Day, he was another disciple of Christ and prophet for God, who was willing to risk all that he had and all that he was, for what he was called to do. I would share one of his quotes with you:

"All I'm saying is simply this, that all life is interrelated, that somehow we're caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one, directly affects all, indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality."

Who will have the courage required to listen...and then to speak? Who can speak the truth to the power before them so we can all be what we ought to be? First we need to help each other recognize God. Like Samuel we cannot rest until we know who is calling us and why. We need to understand that we are all called, and all called to differing tasks.

On the journey to becoming a pastor in the United Methodist Church there is one question asked of us over and over: "Can you describe your call to ministry." Hopefully the answer matures as we mature in ministry. I invite you to consider your call to ministry within this church and this community, not pastoral ministry for most of you, but some kind of ministry.

Look back over where you have been, what you have learned in life and where God may be pointing you through those experiences and understandings about yourself. The look forward to where God would have you heading. And if you are courageous enough or naive enough, pray for God to use you and listen for that call.

One of the other questions asked of people considering pastoral ministry is; "Has anyone ever told you that you might consider being a pastor?" God does send mentors like Eli into our lives to help us hear who is calling and to help us understand the call. God may send us to mentor others in their call.

Ursula Bacon wrote an essay entitled "Making a Miracle" which gives us a bit more to process and ponder: On Pearl Harbor Day, December 7, 1941, Japanese troops occupied Shanghai...once again Jewish lives were threatened. The Japanese ordered the entire Jewish refugee population to move into a designated area (the worst part of town, already occupied by thousands of locals), allowing little time to find nooks and crannies to call home.

The first thing I learned about being 'incarcerated' was that men raged against their confinement and women made curtains. My mother cut up a useless evening gown to make flounces and panels for the one window in the nine-by-twelve cubicle that would house us for the next six years.

We lived on top of each other under the most difficult conditions and learned quickly to make the best of them. Some did better than others, and among those who made a difference in my eleven-year-old life was the round-faced, roly-poly, middle-aged Mrs. Rosa Goldberg...

Each morning as I was on my way to our makeshift warehouse classroom, she would stop me, reach out her hand to grasp mine, pull me to a stop at her side, look up into my face, and ask, "So! What does Mrs. Gordberg tell you every day, little girl?" Knowing her game well, I shook my head, voiced a quiet I-don't-know, and waited.

"Well, darlink, Mrs. Goldberg will have to tell you again. Now listen and remember what I am telling you," she instructed. "Go out and make a miracle today. God's busy, and can't do it all." Her face beamed up at me, her hand let go of mine. With a friendly parting pat, she sent me on my way, giving me a purpose for the day and meaning to my life that will be mine as long as I shall live. She handed me wings to fly, opened my eyes to a world that needs miracles, and gave me assurance that I could do God's work.

God continued to call Samuel until he could understand who was beckoning. Thank God for that persistence! Without God's persistent calling, how many of us would be where we are today? It is the mentor, Eli who tells us what to say "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."