

UNEXPECTED SUMMER: GOD CALLS

1 Samuel 3:1-10

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I.

Nothing quite grabs our attention like a voice in the night. Rarely is it a good thing. The voice may come from the next bedroom: "Mom, I'm sick," or a teenager's cell phone: "Hey, Dad, I got a flat tire."

I didn't sleep well when my niece and nephew were little and had their first few sleepovers at my house. I was worried they'd wake up, stand beside my bed in the middle of the night like some horror movie, and call out my name. As someone who lives alone and is unaccustomed to the noise of others in my house, I feared my knee-jerk reaction from the depths of sleep might traumatize us all.

When a voice calls our name in the night, it can sometimes take a few moments for us to make sense of what is going on, where we're at, and who is speaking, especially if we are not used to anyone speaking to us in such a way or at such a time.

This is the experience of young Samuel in our story today.

II.

Acclaimed preacher Frederick Buechner once told about an extraordinarily effective teacher of the Old Testament at Union Theological Seminary, where Buechner attended. His name was James Muilenburg. One of the many things Muilenburg told his students is that we can't really hear the stories of the Bible and what they're saying until we listen to them as stories about ourselves. We have to imagine our way into them. He said we have to imagine ourselves as the Prodigal Son, coming home terrified that the door will be slammed in his face when he gets there, only to have the breath all but knocked out of him by the Great Bear hug of a father before the son can choke out so much as the first word of the speech he's prepared about how sorry he is and how he will never do it again. Not unlike the way you and I, Sunday after Sunday, say in our prayers how sorry we are and how we will never do it again.

We have to put ourselves in the place of the Good Thief, spread-eagled in the merciless near-Eastern Sun, saying to the one dying beside him, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom." Not unlike the way at the heart of every prayer we've ever prayed or will ever pray, you and I are also saying in one form or another: "Remember me, remember me, Jesus remember me."¹

Some of our college students were at my home on Wednesday night for Bible study. We take the passage I'll preach on the upcoming Sunday and walk through the scripture using an ancient practice called *Lectio Divina*, Latin for "Divine Reading." We read the scripture passage three

times, each time using a different translation or paraphrase and pausing for reflection and questions between each reading. We circle words or phrases that stand out to us. We talk about what they mean in the context of the text and culture and then end with the final reflection question, “What is Christ’s invitation to us from this selected Scripture.”

Since we began this Bible Study in the late spring, all the texts have been from the Gospels, but this week, we found ourselves hanging out with Samuel and Eli in the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures. When I asked the final question, “What does this scripture mean to you today?” they were stumped. After some silence, one confessed this story was harder than the Gospel stories to imagine our way into. And the others agreed. The story of Samuel and Eli seemed to them as relevant and valuable as rotary phones and checkbooks. Just wait until our assigned text is in Leviticus or Deuteronomy.

Perhaps you feel the same way. Maybe you struggle to hear what God might be saying to you from this story read earlier. And if that is true for you, as it was for those five young adults sitting in my living room consuming CapriSun and cookies, then you are already on your way to imagining yourself in the story, my friends, for struggling not to hear but to listen is part of the story.

III.

Eli and Samuel have lived and served together among the cold and vast spaces of the temple for some eight or nine years. The emptiness and silence of those corridors echoed the emptiness and silence of so many hearts in those days, for the author of Samuel tells us in verse one that “the word of the Lord was rare in those days and visions were not widespread.”(v.1) They’d been going through the rituals, the motions, the traditions, faithfully tending to the house of God. Yet, it felt like God had moved out or gone radio silent.

It is not hard for some of us to imagine the emptiness and silence, to feel like a word or vision from God is rare, almost absent, yet we keep going through the motions. Eli was a failure as a priest and a parent. His two sons were horrible people, stealing offerings and disrespecting God, others, and their father. God warned Eli in chapter two to expect judgment because Eli failed to keep his sons in line. As Eli walked through the spaces of the temple day and night, offering prayers and praying for offerings, it must have felt like those prayers just hung in the air with nowhere to go, with no one to listen. Not unlike how sometimes we pray and serve and go to church and go through the motions, and our prayers just seem to hang in the air.

We don’t know if Hannah, Samuel’s mom, knew of Eli’s immense failure as a dad, but whether she did or not, she, with her barren womb, had made a promise to give her son back to the Lord if God would give her a son, just one son is all she asked. So, after Samuel was born and weaned, about the age of three, Hannah showed up at the temple with her son and, with a mix of gratitude and grief, handed over the very thing she had begged for. She handed him to Eli, the priest who perhaps questioned why anyone would entrust their son to him when he failed so miserably with his own. Not unlike how we, like Eli, wonder how God might entrust anything to us when we’ve failed so miserably before. Not unlike how we, like Hannah, have prayed and

prayed for God to give us what we want, only to give back the very thing we birthed, whether a dream, a plan, or a child, entrusting it or them and its future to God and God's purposes.

Samuel grows up at the temple with Eli and his two horrible preacher kids. Samuel served God in a season when abusive people in the name of God ran the show, visions were not widespread, and Samuel himself had not ever had a personal encounter with this God he faithfully served. Not unlike how we, like Samuel, look around and see people getting away with disrespecting everyone, including God, even in the name of God, while we faithfully tend to what is asked of us, yet God never seems to make things right or bother to utter a word of "thanks" or "good job."

But when Samuel was around 12, the same age as Kagan, who read our scripture today, God finally spoke with a message that God says will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle. (v. 11)

The young Samuel hears a voice four times in the night. The first three times, he thinks it is old, nearly blind Eli calling to him, but when he asks Eli what he needs, Eli tells him, "I need you to stop waking me up!" After the third interruption, it finally dawns on Eli that it must be the Lord, though a word from the LORD was rare in those days. Having remembered the times the LORD called to him and he had heard, Eli tells Samuel what to say if he hears the voice again. And Samuel does. The LORD calls to Samuel the fourth and final time, and Samuel does as he was told, answering, "Speak for your servant is listening." (v.10)

And boy, does God speak. He tells young Samuel that God is a God of promise, and the promise of judgment against Eli and his sons is coming. It must have been a long night for Samuel, tossing and turning over all that had happened. He finally had a word from the Lord, which was rare, but the word was also raw. If there had been any other word, Samuel would have run breathlessly to Eli to tell him what had happened. But after the unexpected visit, the unexpected voice, and the unexpected vision from the LORD, Samuel stayed in bed with the blanket pulled up to his chin, maybe even over his head, not wanting to pass the word on to his mentor. When morning came, Eli called to Samuel and dragged the word of the LORD out of him. While visions were not widespread, this vision was the same as the one Eli had received a few years earlier from a man of God. Nothing had changed. Judgment was coming. God was ready to do a new thing. And Eli said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him." (v. 18)

As Eli's story ends in tragedy, Samuel's story rises out of its ashes. We're told at the end of chapter three that "as Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground." (v. 19)

IV.

This story is not first of all about Samuel or Eli; it is about the God who has revealed God's self, not by appearing in person, but by speaking a word. This same God has revealed God's self through the Word made flesh in Jesus the Christ. This same God has revealed God's self through the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. It is a story about a God who continues to

reveal God's self so we know, see, and hear God, not with our head, eyes, or ears, but with our hearts and our entire selves, and in hearing and listening, we might respond as Samuel, "Speak for your servant is listening." Perhaps the word was rare in those days and visions not widespread, not because God was not speaking or calling, but rather they, not unlike us, are so distracted, so busy, so enamored with doing what is right in our own eyes, that we cannot hear God calling our name.

We expect God to show up in spectacular signs or miraculous interventions, not in stillness and silence. We expect God to speak when all is well and when the worship moves us, not when we feel unmoved. We expect God to call only those with wisdom and years, not a child who does not yet know the LORD. But God, God's work, and God's ways are beyond our expectations.

What might God be calling us to? God's calling can be about "what I should do with my life," but it also can be about getting our bearings, especially in times of anxiety and times of disorientation. In times of chaos, God reorients us, calling us back to what's truly most important, calling us back to God's Self and God's purpose.

How do we hear and follow God's call? When we sense a prompting or voice in the night, how do we recognize from whom it is coming? From Samuel's story, one sign of a divine word is repetition, so we ask: Does the prompting persist, or is it passing? Another sign is in Eli's advice to be still and intentionally, thoughtfully listen; to silence the noise without and within with the help of the Spirit and our spiritual practices and rhythms. And a third possible sign is those "tingling ears." The Spirit's work in our lives will challenge, stir, and even disturb us, making us uncomfortable, and that inspiration and prodding can mean we are moving in the right direction. God often leads us beyond comfort and control, two of the most challenging things to surrender.

Thomas Merton once wrote, "My life is listening. God's is speaking. My salvation is to hear and respond." We're reminded that our journey is about being attentive to God's voice, and like Samuel, we must be ready to listen and respond when God calls us.

God calls each of us to do unexpected things in unexpected ways and at unexpected times. May our lives be lives of listening and responding to the unexpected adventures God has for us for the glory of God and the good of the world.

Let us pray: *God who calls; thank you for calling us by name and for your plans that are greater than we can imagine. Help us be attentive to your voice, ready to respond, and follow where you lead. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.*

Melissa Hatfield © 2024

All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkZ3PHxWh6A>