

January 14, 2024
Second Sunday after Epiphany, Year B
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Psalms 139:1-5, 12-17

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

John 1:43-51

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Speak, LORD, for your servants are listening.

During the next few weeks, we will be hearing a lot about call – about God calling. This morning we hear about Samuel, a youth, called in the middle of the night, at a time when the word of God was rare. And we hear about Philip and Nathaniel, grownups, called in the middle of the day, when the Word of God walked among us.

Let's turn first to Samuel. Samuel was a special boy – a gift from God to his mother Hannah, who dedicated him to God and sent him to live with Eli, the priest at Shiloh, one of the main centers for Israelite worship in the period before the Temple.

Samuel grew up in the presence of God – he slept near the Ark of the Covenant; he heard the stories of God's love day after day. Even though he was a boy, we might expect that Samuel, of all people, would have been able to recognize the voice of God calling.

But he didn't...at least not at first. When Samuel hears God calling in the night, he thinks it is the aged Eli calling him. Only after the third time, Eli figures out that it is God who is calling Samuel – and he tells Samuel how to respond: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." I always wonder if there is sadness in old, blind Eli, that God isn't calling him.

The point is that Samuel knew that SOME one was calling, he just didn't know who, so he didn't know how to answer. He needed Eli's help to make the proper response.

Every time I hear this story, I'm reminded of Ernestine the Operator. You remember that character that Lily Tomlin created, the one who would say seemingly silly things like, "Have I reached the party to whom I am speaking?" Given the story of Samuel, maybe it's not such a silly thing to say, after all.

Once Samuel realizes who's making the call and starts listening – and remember that God has been a little out of touch lately – Samuel finds out that God is going to start doing great things in Israel through Samuel. Years later, it would be Samuel who would choose David over all his brothers and anoint him as King of Israel.

In the Gospel lesson from John, we hear of a different sort of call – a kind of referral. After his baptism, Jesus heads toward Galilee. On the way, he calls Philip, who follows him. Philip, in turn, comes across a fellow named Nathaniel, and says – “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

To stretch the telephone image a little bit more, it’s like getting a call on your cell phone that you don’t answer because you don’t recognize the number. “Can anything good come out of that area code? Out of Nazareth?”

But Philip doesn’t try to explain anything about Jesus to Nathaniel. He simply says, “Come and see.” Nathaniel tags along just to see what all the fuss is about, and when Jesus shows him his powers of perception, Nathaniel declares that Jesus is the Son of God.

And, like Samuel, Nathaniel begins to learn of the great things that Jesus will do: “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

God calls both Samuel and Nathaniel – and they each need someone to help them recognize and receive those calls.

Now, friends, there’s a danger in hearing these stories about call in the Bible. The danger is that it’s too easy to sit back and think of them merely as stories that may have happened a long time ago to some long dead people. Do we really believe that God still calls to us? Here? In this time and place?

If I didn’t believe that God continues to call each and every one of us, day in and day out, I can’t imagine being here with you. My personal experience of call is less of God beckoning me forward than of realizing that there’s a large, but divine, boot print on my hind parts.

So, yes, I believe that the word of God is not rare and that calls are frequent. But, it’s still too easy to imagine that God’s calls are placed only to those of us who end up wearing the fancy clothes on Sunday. But, week after week, you all show me (and I hope you show yourselves as well) that this is not true.

Maybe it’s the phone call that comes unexpectedly that someone is sick, and you say, without a second thought, “I’ll be right there.” Maybe it’s when the priest makes eye contact before you think to look away! Maybe it’s someone saying, “come and see!”

Like Samuel and Nathaniel, we all receive our calls in the midst of community – maybe within our family of origin, maybe within the families we make for ourselves, maybe within our parish. No matter how or when your call comes, responding to it is

never a solo act. One of our responsibilities as church is to encourage everyone to hear the voice that calls them forth – to become all that they are created to be.

The God who calls out of love is relentless in pursuing us. God does not give up on us, even when we give up on ourselves. The Psalmist says it beautifully,

“There is not a word on my lips, but you, O LORD, know it altogether.
You press upon me behind and before and lay your hand upon me.”

So, when you hear that nagging, persistent call, don't be quick to think that

the voice you hear in the night comes from another room,
your dreams are simply the result of eating before bedtime,
that the inner nudge you feel is your mind playing tricks on you.

Do you let yourself trust the referral calls that come from friends and family?

Do you follow your heart (or your gut) and accept the invitation to “come and see?”

This time of year is rich with occasions to pause and celebrate folks who heard and responded to God's call within their own communities, both religious and political. Some of them get holidays: George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Others are less known, but no less worthy of our attention. These are they who populate the calendar of saints, or the folks lifted up in Black History Month. Then there are those who are personal to this community of Grace, those who have gone on before us, whom we will remember in a special way at the Annual Meeting. Each of you will also have those in your own life and family who were models of God's call lived out well.

In these weeks before the Annual Meeting, I encourage you to think about how God is calling you to be a member of this parish community. Leadership is important, but so is followership. What links them is the intention to connect more deeply with each other in our common work to be a beacon of Christ in this neighborhood. There is room for everyone, and everyone is important in this work to which God calls us all. Let us pray:

Relentless and Inescapable God, you continue to call us each by name both night and day. So stir us with your voice that we may awaken and say without fear, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” Amen.