

R.S.V.P.

A Sermon Preached by the
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January 18, 2009
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bloomington, Minnesota

1 Samuel 3:1-20
John 1:43-51

You may have heard me say that sometimes the lectionary gods smile on us, and January is one of those times. Whether it's by God or by guess, as my mother would say, the lectionary selections in January are always full of stories about being called by God, which serendipitously coincide with many churches electing, ordaining or installing new church officers, those members who have sent back their R.S.V.P to the invitation to serve.

The Gospel lesson this morning is perhaps not as familiar as some of the calls to discipleship, but is every bit as compelling in its invitation. To Nathanael, who says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip says, "Come and see." Come and see. And when he does, Nathanael, like all of us, becomes one who follows Jesus; Nathanael, like all of us, is pressed into service, is given God's work to do. Once he sends back his R.S.V.P., his life will never be the same.

The Old Testament lesson is much more familiar to most of us. It's the story of the boy Samuel hearing the voice of God. I'm always struck by the opening words of this chapter of 1 Samuel: "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread," which somehow seem strangely appropriate even now. You might remember that Samuel was called by God at a time of spiritual desolation, religious corruption, political danger, and social upheaval for Israel. At the top of the list was the corruption of the old priest Eli's sons, and the failure of leadership in the temple.

Israel's assertion that there was only one true God meant that Yahweh moved with them. Yahweh delivered them from slavery in Egypt, traveled with them through the wilderness, and brought them to the promised land. As they struggled to establish themselves in this new place, they found themselves competing with the local polytheism of the Canaanite's Ba'alism, which believed in a localized deity, a god tied to one place, whose jurisdiction was limited by specific boundaries. Wanting to fit in, the Israelites were lured into building houses for Yahweh as well, and the temple at Shiloh, where Eli and his sons served as priests, was one such place. The problem became obvious when shrines began popping up all over the place, in Jerusalem, Bethel, Dan and Samaria, each claiming to be the dwelling place of God.

Someone has written, "Even if Yahweh were willing to put up with such sneaking Ba'alism, God was not about to stand for the kind of priestly shenanigans that are described in 1 Samuel." We read in the second chapter, for

example, that the sons of Eli the priest were “scoundrels, they had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people.”

It is a story of sin and consequences, and many contemporary American Christians are just not very comfortable with those themes. We’d prefer optimism, positive thinking, and joyful possibility because they sound so much more promising for an attractive, upbeat faith. Stories like the ones told in the first and second chapters of 1 Samuel are hard for us to hear.

But this is more than a story of sin and consequences. It is also a story about hearing God, and understanding God’s call. Because, remember, that into this mix of creeping dishonor and failed relationship comes a ray of hope – Samuel, the boy promised to God by his mother, Hannah; brought to the temple when he was old enough to leave her, raised by Eli, the now elderly priest. Into this offensive state of affairs at Shiloh comes the voice of God through the boy Samuel.

Surely there were days when Samuel must have wondered what his mother had gotten him into. He’d spent most of his life obediently serving Eli, waiting on the priestly family, but not once had he perceived God’s presence in the temple or God’s purpose for his life. It must have seemed like a spiritual desert at times. He had been dedicated to God, but where was God? “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”

And then came the middle-of-the-night visit from God. Now when God makes an appearance, you can be sure it is to make a point. Given that it took three tries to get his attention, God may have been wondering what was up with Samuel, who was, after all, sleeping in the temple, where the ark of God was kept. Three times during the night Samuel heard what he assumed to be Eli calling him. Three times, Samuel got up, went to the place where Eli was sleeping, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” And three times, Eli said, “No I didn’t. Go back to sleep.” Finally, the light bulb went on for Eli and he realized that Samuel was hearing the voice of God. Good mentor that he was, Eli gave Samuel specific things to do so that he might be ready for God’s vision: “Go, lie down; and if God calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’”

It’s probably good advice for all of us, especially in mid-January right after the Christmas holiday! “Go lie down.” Don’t you wish somebody would say that to you? Go lie down. In other words, just getting busier and busier may not necessarily be the best way to discover what God has for us to do, or what kind of service we can best offer.

Perhaps what we need to do is stop for a while and listen; listen for the voice of God, however and whenever it comes to us. Which is, of course, what Eli was trying to tell Samuel. We need to tune in and stay tuned in if we expect to be on the receiving end of God’s call.

And finally, Eli’s advice to Samuel was to answer, to ask God what God wanted him to do, because this wasn’t a one-way conversation. It still isn’t, by the way. One commentator wrote that, “If God had been interested only in companionship, the work of creation would have come to a screeching halt after

dogs came into the world. Dogs will come when you call, lie at your feet, go for long walks with you, and above all, show you unconditional, unmerited devotion.”

But God isn't satisfied with simple companionship; God wants relationship with us. And relationship requires intentional exchange. If God had only wanted Samuel to become a mouthpiece for the divine message, God might not have hesitated after each of the first three calls. God would have just gone right on and told Samuel what to do. But God wanted an answer. Eli's counsel to Samuel was to speak up, to say, "I'm here, I'm listening, what do you want me to do?"

Like Samuel, we probably all have trouble with Eli's advice. Take his admonition to "lie down" for example. We could interpret Eli's advice as a way of saying, "let go." Lying down made Samuel surrender to a much more powerful force. All his jumping up and down, in and out of bed, was Samuel's attempt to remain in control of the strange, somewhat unnerving encounter he was experiencing. What Eli was really advocating for Samuel was to trust the Spirit, to let go and wait and listen. It's hard not to be in control when it seems that there is chaos all around us. It's only natural for us to want to be able to control what little we can, when there is so much that we have no control over.

And that's not all bad. Sometimes managing what little control we have allows us to let go of the things we can't control at all. Some of you may know that my husband, Derek, has had non-Hodgkins lymphoma for twenty-five years. He's been in remission for the last five or six years, but for the first twenty years we never got more than a year or a year and a half without an episode that required treatment. About the only way that either of us could manage to keep our sanity through it all was to continue doing exactly what we had been doing, getting up and going to work, managing the kids' school and activity schedules, putting dinner on the table, cleaning up, helping with homework, and then doing it all over again the next day. We simply had to let go and trust that God would get us through the chaos that we couldn't control. And I know that's true for many of you who live in similar circumstances.

And then there's that whole thing about listening. It's so tempting, isn't it, to fill up the silence with words? It's so hard to keep quiet, when often the very best thing we can do is just listen. Think about the times that your friends or your spouse or your children just want you to listen, and not offer advice or solutions, and how hard it is not to jump in with what you think is the right answer or the perfect solution or the best way to do it. Think about how hard it is to just focus on what they're saying rather than already formulating the answer in your head. And yes, even if we're remarkably patient and well-trained in the art of active listening, we all do it!

Finally, God wants an answer. When God extends an invitation, or issues a call, I really do believe that God expects an answer! How often in our lives have we had the opportunity to answer and have chosen instead to close our hearts to God's call? On this Sunday when we lift up and remember the work and ministry and sacrifice of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we might think about how different our lives would be today if he had chosen not to answer God's call; if he had chosen another less dangerous path, one that didn't require him to place his trust in God's will for his life. Like Samuel, who was called by God to deliver a

harsh message of judgment that was necessary if there was to be a hopeful new beginning for Israel, Martin Luther King, Jr. understood his call to be prophetic as well, and knew that while it would be heard by some as a harsh message of judgment, it was also necessary if there was to be a hopeful new beginning for this country.

At a time when others were standing back, fearful of what the future of the civil rights movement might mean for them, Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded all of us of what God's call for justice and peace could and should mean for us. Could any of us have imagined then that on Tuesday, we will inaugurate our first African-American President? Whatever your politics, it is an extraordinary moment in the history of this country; and it is upon us, in large measure, because of people like Martin Luther King, Jr., who listened and prayed and said "yes" to God's call for their lives.

Few of us will be called into that kind of service. Probably even fewer of us will hear the voice of God as clearly as Samuel did. But all of us are called, all of us are invited to be part of God's work in the world. And God expects an answer. Those who will stand up here this morning to respond to the ordination questions have listened for God's voice, they have discerned God's call for their lives, and they have said "yes."

One of the ordination questions that we will answer this morning as a congregation uses the phrase "chosen by God through the voice of this congregation" to describe those we are ordaining and installing. In answering "yes" we are affirming God's call for their lives, and for our own, and we are pledging our support, our prayers, and our help. Our newly elected elders and deacons come into service with the currently serving elders and deacons at a challenging moment in the history of this church. We are not the same congregation we were when the last Pastor was called. We are at a point of transition and transformation in ways that we can't yet envision. And all of us will need to invest in the journey.

There may be difficult decisions to be made as we go forward – there always are – but there is also much to be grateful for. This is a congregation that is richly blessed with more than enough energy, intelligence, imagination, and love to go around, and we will move through whatever is ahead with grace and hope. My prayer is that we will truly understand ourselves as called into service, and that we will begin to seek ways to manifest that call with renewed enthusiasm and commitment, building up the Body of Christ as God has claimed us to be and to become. So go lie down, let go, listen for God, and send back your R.S.V.P. Amen.