

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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1 Samuel 3:1-18

Let us pray for the presence of God's Spirit.

Open our ears, O God, that we may hear your voice. Challenge us with your word – call us out of wherever we may be sleeping and into awareness and alertness. Hearing your word, give us voices to proclaim your goodness. In Jesus name, Amen.

Last week we heard a story of the people of Israel before they lived in Canaan. We hear this week from after the people have entered the land – but they are not yet settled. We are at a transitional point in their history. While they have entered the land where God has told them to go after wandering in the wilderness, the kingdom of Israel has not been established. They are a loose federation of tribes, surrounded by powerful kingdoms – and their future is uncertain. They are led, at this time, by charismatic leaders known as judges. However, many of the judges were not righteous rulers. Throughout the book of Judges, which chronicles many of these rulers, there is a cycle of sin and repentance. The book ends by saying, “in those days there was no king in Israel, all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”

In this backdrop, enters the boy, Samuel. Samuel is the son of Hannah, who previously had promised God that if she had a son, she would dedicate him to God, and commit him to serving the Lord. It is here that we pick up our story from the third chapter of 1 Samuel. Listen for the word of God.

1 Samuel 3:1-18

¹Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. ²At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the 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. ⁴Then the Lord called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and he said, “Here I am!” ⁵and 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. ⁶The 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.” ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸The 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. ⁹Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if God calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. ¹⁰Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

¹¹Then 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. ¹²On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³For 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. ¹⁴Therefore, I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever." ¹⁵Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. ¹⁶But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." ¹⁷Eli said, "What was it that God 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 God told you." ¹⁸So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the LORD; let God do what seems good to the Lord."

"Can you hear me now?" Maybe some of you remember those commercials from several years ago – where the man would walk in a variety of locations, many of them remote, with his phone to his ear and ask "Can you hear me now?" It was a commercial to highlight the range of the network of the cell phone company to let people know how amazing the coverage was – that you would be able to hear anywhere on your phone – "can you hear me now?"

The scene in our scripture today is reminiscent of those commercials. Samuel is a boy living in the temple under the instruction and care of Eli. Samuel is in the temple because of an earlier promise. Samuel's mother Hannah was distraught that she was not able to have a child and promised God that if she was given a child, she would dedicate him to God's service. Samuel is in the temple because Hannah has kept her promise.

It is night and Samuel is sleeping in the temple and he hears a voice calling out to him. Thinking it is Eli, his teacher, he runs to Eli and says "Here I am." Eli, perhaps a bit grumpy for being woken up, gruffly says

to Samuel, “I did not call; lie down.” Samuel does as he is told, but again he hears a voice calling him. Again Samuel runs to Eli and says, “Here I am, because you called for me.” For the second time Eli says, that he did not call and tells Samuel to lie down. But for a third time Samuel hears the voice calling. When he approaches Eli the third time, Eli finally perceives that it is God calling and instructs Samuel to lie down again, but that if he hears the voice calling again, that it is God, and that Samuel should answer, “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” Samuel does just that, he hears the voice again – and Samuel responds and tells God that he is listening.

What Samuel hears is a bit shocking. God tells Samuel that God is about to punish Eli because his sons have not followed in the ways of God, and Eli did nothing to stop them or correct them. This is not good news for Eli, and Samuel is rightfully, I think, worried about what God has told him to tell Eli. Samuel, after hearing this prophecy from God, lays there until morning, afraid to tell Eli the vision.

I am amazed a bit at Eli. You would think that a person who dedicated their life to the service of God would do a better job at recognizing the voice of God. You would expect someone that has lived a faithful and long life to be able to hear the voice of God. Or maybe not. I think that maybe a lot of faithful people have a hard time hearing God’s voice.

But, on a more serious note, I do think that there are plenty of people who have been faithful for a long time, and they may not hear the calling of God. Maybe it’s not just that Eli is sleepy – maybe Eli just isn’t expecting God to show up, and so he has stopped listening for God. Maybe the threefold call is as much for Samuel as it is for Eli. Maybe his faith is more routine than relationship.

Toward the end of our worship today, we will sing the hymn, “I the Lord of Sea and Sky,” which is more popularly known as “Here I Am, Lord.” I know for many of you, and for me, it is a favorite hymn. I find it to be uplifting and hopeful. It echoes the words of the eager boy Samuel when he hears a voice in the night. It echoes Moses when he hears the voice calling from the bush. “Here I Am.” It’s a sentence and a statement that says – “I’m ready for whatever you need,” but it is also a statement of presence – “Here I am.”

The song is lovely – it’s lyrical and beautiful – but a call is never quite as easy as the song makes it seem. The call of Moses was a little more complicated. The call of Samuel was fraught with concern, uncertainty, and apprehension.

When Samuel finally listens to the call of God, God indicates that God “is about to do something...that will make both ears of anyone who hears tingle.” What a way to start. To have your ears tingle when you hear. It’s like when people ask you if your ears are burning because someone was talking about you. Perhaps this is what Eli felt in the morning, and that’s why he asked Samuel not to withhold any of the vision. The phrase about one’s ears burning is said to go back to Roman times. If one’s right ear was burning it meant praise, and if one’s left ear was burning it was something with evil intent. In the passage, God tells Samuel that both ears will tingle. I don’t know if the writer of the story had the same belief about ears burning or not, but it is hard for me to hear this story and not think of it.

Perhaps a call isn’t as nice and easy as we think – and it isn’t. The call of God can be complicated, and many of us may be reluctant or fearful. In fact, most call narratives in scripture show a reluctant servant of God. Moses argues with God before he finally says yes. Gideon objects,

Jeremiah as well. Isaiah asks for a time limit, Jonah runs the opposite direction. Time and again, those that are called by God have some objection. It's true of most people.

I think I have become a little nonchalant about talking about hearing a call from God. Going through the process of ordination and being in seminary, I got very familiar hearing other's call stories and talking about my own. As a pastor I have the privilege of ordaining and providing training for Deacons and Elders, and we talk about the calling of God. Because of this, I forget how weird it might sound. Cole Arthur Riley writes, "When I first began going to church, I couldn't believe how casually people spoke about hearing a calling from God. To them, it seemed as ordinary as having your mom on speed dial. A God who simply tells you to move abroad, or change jobs, or get married, or be single... That God would spend her time talking to people about which state to live in but would not rouse herself to tell me that she is real or that I am loved. It weighs on you as a kind of injustice that God would call some so distinctly and precisely and leave the rest of us to replay our own dreams five times a night just so we know which corner to hide in."ⁱ

Not all are called in the same way, and not all receive their call in the same way. For some, it may be a blinding light like that for Saul turned Paul on the road to Damascus. For others, it may be an increasing sense of moral compulsion like that of Jeremiah. Or perhaps it is circumstances beyond our control that finally make us heed the call, even reluctantly like Jonah. Or perhaps, we are like Samuel – receiving a word but not perceiving it at first. The ways in which people receive and respond to God's call are different – but we all have a call.

In Samuel's case, he didn't fully understand who was calling or for what purpose he was being called – but he responded eagerly to the voice each time with “Here I am.” Samuel had a willingness to respond, he was open to what was needed of him, he was repeatedly ready to be available for service.

However, as Cole Arthur Riley also points out, “We cannot talk about...calling without contending with the fact that there are those who have been denied choice, equity, and dignity...” in the work to which they believed they are called.ⁱⁱ It becomes incumbent upon those of us with privilege of choice and opportunity to work for the ability for all to have choice and opportunity in their calling.

Samuel needed the help of others to hear and understand that God was calling, and to make the call happen. And I imagine that is true for many of us – that it takes the discernment of others to know the nudge and call of God in our lives. In my own call, it was through a variety of people, and a number of conversations, and encouragement from people to listen, that I finally understood that God was speaking to me. It took time for me to hear.

Calling, like most of the Christian life, takes place in community. And that's why it gets messy, and that's why calling can be difficult, because we live it out in community. Many people love the piece of scripture that says, “where two or three are gathered, I am there with you.” This is most often quoted in terms of praising God for the love of community – for the goodness of the gathered community. The original context of the scripture, however, is about what to do in conflict. If there is conflict, the scripture indicates, get two or three together and then God will be with them to discern how to move through and resolve the conflict. It takes

more than one person to truly hear God. And any time there is more than one, it can get a little messy.

A call can be disquieting. It can lead to some sleepless nights. Our calling as the church isn't as nice and easy as we sometimes want it to be. It's not easy to do a new thing. It's not easy to do the work. And so sometimes, we just need to remember that being present is also the work. That saying "Here I am" is just as important as doing the work.

But, even with all its messiness, being in community makes for a richer life. It leads to deeper understandings. It fosters stronger growth. The community of faith encourages and supports, challenges and bolsters. Yes, there are times when we are grumpy, and tired. There are times when we have to say, or even hear, a difficult word. But there are also times when we are lifted up. There are times when our joys are made all the more joyous because we celebrate them with others. There are times when we can't or don't recognize the calling of God, and someone can say – "hey, listen up, that's God talking to you." And there are times when people are able to see and name things about how special we are that we would not otherwise see. Yes, calling, and calling into community, can be difficult – but I believe the good far outweighs the bad.

The ancient story of scripture today begins with a rather contemporary message. It starts, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." I say it's a contemporary message – because it feels as if the word of God isn't evident, and that visions are rare. I think, given our contemporary world, it's imperative that we dare to listen and that we dare to dream, that we dare to have a vision for what God is calling the world to in the future. The world desperately needs to hear a good word from God – and that requires that there are people who

are willing to listen and to respond. We are such a people. We are called to listen and respond. We are called to dream and to have visions of a different future.

“Can you hear me now?” It’s not just a commercial for a phone company – I think it’s God calling even in the remotest of places, even in the darkest of nights – calling for people to respond. “Can you hear me now?” God is calling us to dream dreams and have visions.

Because we belong to God, and to one another, we give to God that which is God – namely ourselves. We take this sacred covenant between us and God, and we give our lives back to God; in our worship and our work.

We are a living and breathing body called together and claimed by God. Here is where we can listen and respond to the word of God – where we can have a vision for what the world might be. Where we can expect to hear God calling – and answer, “Here I Am.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us*. Page 43.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, page 51.