

This Call Is For You

1 Samuel 3: 1-11 John 1: 43-51

It used to be that the phone would ring at home or at the office. You don't know who's calling because Caller ID wasn't invented yet. Someone else answers the phone, but turns to you and says, "This call is for you." How did they know? The other party asked for you by name. It wasn't a call for anyone but you.

Who could it be and what could they want? With a mixture of excitement and dread, we take the receiver and try to discover what this is all about. In a moment or two, we know.

God's call to the faithful servant resembles that, a suggestion that brings with it a mixture of excitement and dread.

The excitement is the prospect of a challenge, an adventure, an exploration into areas where we would like to know more, but have our doubts about proceeding. The dread shares the same components, but it's hung up on the uncertainty, the perils, and the sense of unpreparedness. For the servant, it's a question of whether the excitement overcomes the dread that evokes an affirmative response. And that will be a question of faith, to take the plunge, make the leap, and venture forth as the Spirit leads the way into new areas of ministry and service.

You likely remember the story about barren Hannah, her deal with God, the birth of Samuel, and Samuel's placement in serving in the temple with old Eli, as per her covenant with God. You may also remember that Eli's two sons were wicked, corrupt scoundrels, certainly not role models for any worthy behavior. Eli seems to be either committed to being "unaware" – I see nothing; I hear nothing; I know nothing – or else refuses to act to control their evil behavior. Either way, God is not happy with old Eli. Yet despite a resume that would indicate that Eli and his family would be the wrong place for any child to be placed, this is the one which God selected. This rather useless fellow is the guy to whom Samuel has been entrusted, and under whose tutelage Samuel will grow, learn, and mature. Go figure.

Our chapter 3 starts in verse 2: *In those days, the word of the Lord was **rare**; there were **not** many visions.* It would seem that communications between God and God's people was virtually non-existent. Perhaps God has stopped sharing his word with a people that has shown indifference, even hostility to God's word, as in the case of Eli's sons. This perceived withdrawal by God would also explain a cessation of visions, as people see what they see and nothing more, and hear what they hear and nothing more, descriptive of a rather flat, uninspired environment. The inflections of the Spirit's ministry have been absent. The sacred dimension remains closed off to this people. Let's say that the spiritual phone isn't ringing.

On the other hand, it may be that God's people no longer listen for the word of God, and no longer expect visions. God has become a fixture of weekly ritual life, kind of

like having a lamp to put on when the sun goes down, but nothing more. For the people, God is nothing upsetting, disturbing, or attention-getting, and also nothing inspiring, life-changing, or gracious. The people of God would appear to be shut off from the source of life, from the sacred and spiritual.

Amid this suffocating **lack** of dynamism and creativity and imagination, there is a scene played out in the temple at night. *At night*, of course, the time when consciousness lapses and the unconscious idles the physical and spiritual. The body asleep is the state of society that has removed its connectivity with the message of God's word and the vision of God's way.

We're also re-introduced to old Eli. You won't be surprised that old Eli is weak, rather inert, and quite blind. He is quite relatable to the society as a whole; weak, inert, and blind. His sons, Hophni and Phineas, represent the active elements of society, its leading members, mired in sexual scandal and financial corruption, thoroughly abusing their positions of trust simply to satisfy their own personal desires, and facing no accountability for their unbridled sinfulness.

As Hannah was barren, so is the society of which Eli and his sons are exemplary. Yet God acted in covenant with Hannah, for she remained faithful, a witness amid the forsaken, a light amid the darkness. God brought life to overcome Hannah's barrenness. It's a reminder that God is still sovereign, even though no one listens, no one sees, no one listens, and no one truly cares. Similarly, the text says *the lamp of God had not yet gone out* – whether speaking about the literal lamp in the temple, or about the figurative light of God's revealing in the darkness of the world. God is still working, like the Spirit in the beginning, the light breaking open the utter darkness.

Though asleep, Samuel is not like all the rest who slumber in semi-consciousness throughout their lives. We know that Samuel *grew up in the presence of the Lord* (2:21b), and *continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men*. (2:26). Samuel is the one who will hear God's word and will see God's way. But it may take some time to get the hang of it.

God calls Samuel's name, the mere servant boy who is known to God, the servant who is worth speaking to. Twice Samuel believes it's old Eli calling out for him. After the third time, something finally awakens in old, useless Eli. He realizes the Lord God is calling the boy Samuel.

Eli tells Samuel what to say: *Speak, for your servant is listening*. Eli had long ago stopped listening for God, and God may have stopped trying to communicate with Eli, too. In any case, Eli eventually "awakens" and makes his own small witness to God that leads Samuel to behold the words and the way of the Lord, setting his course as one who served God faithfully throughout his life.

God's address awakened old Eli, reminding the one without vision, who had forgotten the story, who had no expectation of God appearing at any time, that God has a word and a way, and God will act to make it happen. God calls the faithful servant.

For young Samuel, God promises excitement: *See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.* What do **you** do with a calling message like that?

As we turn to John's gospel, Jesus is in John the Baptist's community, remaining where we left him last week following his baptism. At John's community, Jesus has met Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. In our passage, Jesus has now called Philip to join him. Philip, Andrew and Peter are all from Bethsaida on the northeast coast of the Sea of Galilee. Philip found Nathanael, who may also have been from Bethsaida, and told him about Jesus of Nazareth.

Nathanael is shocked. *Nazareth! Can anything good come from Nazareth?* Having the messiah from God, the Promised One, come from the lawless outback region of Galilee seemed absurd. Criminals, revolutionaries, extremists, and nutters were the types that you got out of Galilee. Oh, this guy may **think** he's the messiah, and he may be **telling** everyone he's the messiah, but really? This guy's from Galilee, right? You don't take those people seriously.

Philip persists, saying: *Come and see [for yourself].* Jesus greets Nathanael with unusual familiarity, even exuberance. Nathanael is taken back a bit by this greeting. Jesus explains that he had seen Nathanael earlier. This mild response produces a strange outburst from Nathanael: *Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.*

Nathanael's comment was pretty over-the-top by any standard. It wasn't like Jesus had done *anything* in the least remarkable. In reply, Jesus questions this outburst of enthusiastic belief by Nathanael, and pivots on the question of belief in Jesus. Such belief, Jesus says, will bring Nathanael into contact with the truly eye-popping. Nathanael will see heaven itself open up, and he'll see *angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man*, just like it was described in Jacob's Ladder in Genesis.

Now Jesus *may* have been speaking literally. However, it's more likely Jesus is describing how Nathanael will behold the closure of the gap between heaven and earth through Jesus and his teaching, his ministry, and his life. Nathanael can be shown what is holy, good, and true, how it can be *on earth as it is in heaven*. This will come through the Son of Man, through Jesus bringing the word of God and the vision for God's way, uniting God's Kingdom to God's creation.

In our readings from scripture this morning, we're encouraged to listen, listen closely for the word of God that interrupts our well-scheduled routine. It's a call meant for you. God can appear in word and vision, through hearing and seeing, to awaken us to the word and the way that is holy and worthy of praise, revealing blessing and grace.

Our daily drill puts our lives in a fairly predictable track. In the humdrum, we can sleep walk, pretending that God, too, is simply in the background, doing background kinds of things. Yet God has a word for you and for me, and a vision for you and for me. May we welcome the interruption when it comes, recognize the appearance of what is

holy and sacred, giving thanks while listening. May we be good partners, not tuning out the interruption to continue whatever we were doing. God has a word for you, a call for you.