

God at Work: “Calling”

1 Samuel 3:1-20

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God’s call to Samuel is a reminder of the work God is doing, even in times of despair and emptiness.

Children hold an incalculable value in our lives. We are moved by their honesty and innocence and often held captive by their spiritual wisdom. Last week our daughter sent us a video of our granddaughter playing “restaurant” with her 11-year-old cousin, Emma. (Jax calls her “E-ma.”) E-ma was taking Jax’ order. Make no mistake: my granddaughter knows what she wants. She told E-ma she’d like a cheeseburger and French fries. (It sort of sounded like “frend friez”) When Emma asked Jax what she would like to drink, Jax responded without hesitation: “Coke.” Jax is two years old, and has more energy than a truckload of Ever-Ready bunnies. I can say without a shadow of doubt that her parents have never given her Coke to drink, at least not in any quantity. Indeed, Emma knew this. She said to Jax, “Jax, you’re only two. You’re too young to have a Coke.” Jax looked at her cousin with wide-eyed amazement, as if to say, “C’mon, cousin, you can do this if you want to!” Emma continued, “You have to be six to have a coke.” Without missing a beat, and with all of the courage of an 18-year-old ordering beer at a bar, Jax looked at her cousin and said, “I six.”

The fun has just begun.

Sometimes the primary way we read this story from 1 Samuel is to see it as a children’s story. We see Samuel tucked into his little bed, deeply dreaming. Samuel has been left at the temple in Shiloh to minister to the needs of Eli, the great judge and priest who is become elderly and frail. You know, my kids might say, just like you Dad. Samuel is there because of a promise made by his mother, “therefore I have lent him to the Lord, as long as he lives; he is given to the Lord.”

The story is packed with details: Eli is old, his eyesight has dimmed; Samuel rests near the symbol of God’s promise; the lamp of the Lord had not yet gone out. In the flickering light, a voice calls out to Samuel.

We come to the conclusion that this is a story of how God speaks to children. And while that is not a bad message, it is not the whole story. a

Clint McCann, who teaches old Testament at Eden Seminary in Webster Groves, remarks that while that is not a bad interpretation, the broader context of 1 Samuel evokes a different story. It turns out, says Clint, that Samuel is being asked to do a grown-up job.

If you read verses 11-20 you suddenly realize that this is more than just a cute story about a little boy who can't stay asleep. It is a story of anticipating what God is about to do, a reminder of how God is indeed at work in unexpected ways. For Eli, it is a story about letting go of all that he had accumulated and all that had mattered most. For Israel, it is a reminder that they are never far from God. God is at work.

Yes, this is a story about how God is at work in unexpected ways. But what God is about to do is hardly child's play.

The story begins with despair and the raw-edged acknowledgement that the "word of the Lord was rare in those days." It is also a story that is filled with contradictions and an unstoppable experience of reversals. It is as if God has played the "uno reverse" God: there are symbols of God's presence everywhere – the lamp that has not yet burned out, the ark of the covenant, the religious heritage of those who come to worship. Yet "the word of the Lord was rare," and visions were not widespread.

The presence of God, says Scott Hoezee, had grown tenuous, the divine light a bare flicker.

But still, God is at work. Samuel soon hears that voice pastor and theologian Ted Wardlow calls the "calling voice." It was the voice that was rare in those days, and perhaps in these days, too. It was the voice calling to Samuel as if in a dream, rousing him from his sleep. Listen, God is calling.

"A call" can sound so holy—perhaps too holy for some. Yet the scriptures are filled with stories of the calls of ordinary women and men. We hear about God calling to Abraham and Sarah, inviting them to leave the emptiness of their past. We hear about Ruth feeling called to not abandon her mother-in-law. Instead of returning to her own homeland, Ruth clings to her mother-in-law, and attaches herself to the possibility of a new life in Israel. We hear the story of Jesus calling Nicodemus out of the trees, summoning him to a new life of generosity and grace. Even the earliest stories of the Bible, the stories of Adam and Eve, are grounded in a sense of God's call. When they fell into their shame, and tried to run away from God, Genesis tells us that God came looking for them. God called out, "Where are you?"

Anne Lamotte is a well-known writer and essayist who happens to be Presbyterian. But back in 1984, she was a struggling, unemployed writer who was drowning in an ocean of drugs, alcohol, an affair with a married man and an eating disorder. She was, as she says, “a mess.” “The elevator was going down very fast,” she remembers. “I don’t think I’d have been alive if I hadn’t found that little church.”

That little church was a tiny African American church in Marin City, CA. St. Andrews Presbyterian Church was meeting in a run-down building near a flea market. Nursing a hangover, Lamotte would often slip into the church doorway as worship was beginning, letting the sounds of gospel music sweep over her. It was, she writes, a choir of five black women and rather Amish looking white man. She would listen to the scripture reading, and then duck out as the sermon started. But she kept coming back. Eventually, she felt Jesus stirring within her, as she says, “sitting on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love.”

Listen, God is calling, through the Word inviting, offering forgiveness, comfort, and joy.

Each time that God calls, Samuel responds by saying, “Here I am,” The word in Hebrew means more than simply the sort of “here” you give during roll call. The word “Hineni,” means something like “I am ready.” Eli teaches Samuel to respond to the voice by quieting himself, removing all the chatter and distractions from his brain. He is to say, simply, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” Samuel must open a space inside of himself to hear the surprising, even disturbing word that God is about to do something new.

I wonder how many times we shrug our shoulders as if to say, “The word of the Lord is rare.” How often do we let the chatter and noise around us keep us from discovering the possibility, the promise, the deep assurance: God is at work. In our anxiousness about trying to do something for God – making sure the candles are still lit, making sure the temple still looks nice – do we take time to open a space where God’s word can come to us?

Let me share a story. This past week found me, as it often does, officiating at funerals for persons without a church home. One of them was for a family whose children attended our Mom’s Day Out. Without going into details, the father had died a sudden, tragic death. The looks on the faces of his children told it all. There were more than 200 people crammed into the funeral home chapel that day, each filled with grief and sadness. The word of the Lord was rare, indeed.

But imagine the possibilities of each of us making a small space where the Calling Voice could be heard—first in our lives, and then in the lives of those who struggle to find hope and meaning. What would it be like if this week, each of us opened our daily prayers by saying, “Here I am. Speak Lord, for your servant is listening?”

God is at work, no doubt about it. Amen.