

## “CALLED”

1 Samuel 3:1-10

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Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the 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.

Then the Lord called, "Samuel, Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and 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.

The 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."

Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the world of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The 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. Therefore, Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathaniel and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth."

It's probably not that surprising to you that I'm working to connect the lectionary texts with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. today. Luckily for me, it isn't all that hard to do. The legacy of Dr. King is undergirded by a deep and distinct sense of call and vision.

Both the Hebrew scripture and the Gospel reading are "call" stories – narratives about hearing and responding to the call of God.

The life of MLK is a call, story, too. It's about risk and the life of a disciple, about being pursued by vision.

This morning, we're going to sit with the Hebrew scripture for awhile – and then briefly with the Gospel as we consider how the biblical witness connects with the life of MLK, and even, us ... the modern-day followers of Christ.

The third chapter of Samuel is commonly referred to as, "The call of Samuel" and theologians draw our attention to the importance of the first verse – "the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision." That verse alerts us to the fact that what's about to happen is unusual. That God stands over the bed of Samuel and calls his name was apparently, something of an uncommon occurrence.

In this text, Samuel is a young man – the previous chapter has chronicled his experience growing up in the service of the Lord. He has learned from Eli, he has gained favor with the people, he has matured in the presence of God. Samuel has spent his entire life in the temple with a priest, and yet, he has never seen the Lord – has never heard the Lord – and when God speaks to him, Samuel does not recognize the voice of the Divine. Scripture seems to go out of its way to tell us that divine vision is so rare and revelatory experience of God so uncommon that when Samuel finally hears God's voice, he has no basis on which to recognize it. It is Eli who discerns that the voice belongs to God, and names the divine presence for Samuel.

I wonder what Eli must have been thinking, and feeling, in that moment. I wonder if he felt a little bit betrayed or a little twinge of jealousy?

Eli had spent his life serving God in the temple ... encountering God the way most of us encounter God; through ritual, through tradition, through service. When you and I come together on Sunday mornings, we encounter something of the Divine through the traditions and ritual of the Church – words and actions that Christians have held sacred for thousands of years. The same was true for Eli. Through his day to day service in the temple, he engaged the Divine. But the scriptures don't bear witness to a visual or audible encounter with God. And here's Samuel – just a kid – being spoken to by God. Was there a reason God chose to speak audibly to Samuel and not Eli? We're not privy to the emotions Eli must have wrestled with in those moments, we only know that Eli chooses to be complicit – to yield what might have been bitterness and jealousy, his own longing to experience God in a tangible way – and to become a part of God's new work.

Especially in light of the fact that Eli never received a personal invitation from God, we know that what Samuel experiences is different – it's distinct – and it signals a new beginning. Israel is about to change, and this is the story of God inviting Samuel to be a part of ushering in that change. The historical context of the text refers to chaos - the religious house of Israel has been corrupted by the sons of Eli, the Philistines are threatening Israel's survival, and the structure of Israel is about to shift from the line of judges to the monarchy. Through Samuel's response to God's call, through prophetic vision and a spiritual sensitivity to God's presence, social transformation is about to enter into a world of religious corruption, political danger, and social upheaval.

Most of us won't be visited by God in such a dramatic way. I don't expect to ever see God standing over my bed, calling my name. I'm pretty certain that I'm more like Eli ... seeking God in my connection with the historic church, through the rituals and liturgy that have connected people with God since antiquity, finding God in the stories and witness of scripture, in the people I love and admire, in the witness of creation. There are moments in my life when this seems like enough, moments when it is enough for me to see God in the beauty of the winter moon on a cold night, enough for

me to trust God is at work somehow and somewhere in the middle of poverty and hunger and loneliness. But, to be honest, there are moments when it's not quite enough and I resent the fact that God isn't showing up physically or audibly in my life.

I think we ought to have great respect for the stories of both Eli and Samuel. For Eli and his faithful service to a Divine presence he had never seen with his own eyes, and for Samuel who saw God and responded to the call of prophet. Because really, who wants to be a prophet? Who wants to disrupt the status quo? To announce judgment? The life of a prophet is anything but comfortable and secure. There are plenty of stories in scripture of prophets struggling with the Divine – running away from God, wrestling with God, not recognizing the voice of God, trying to flat-out say 'no' to God. Remember Jonah, getting as far from Ninevah as he possibly could? Remember Moses begging God to choose someone else? And what do you think Jesus was doing during the 40 days he spent in the wilderness or in the garden of Gethsemane before the crucifixion? I doubt very much that he was in peaceful meditation and union with God.

Moving on to the reading from the Gospel ... The story in John speaks to the calling of Jesus' first disciples. It seems innocent enough. Jesus says, "Follow me." And they do. I'm pretty certain they didn't know what they were getting themselves into. By the time the narrative gets to the crucifixion, the disciples are just figuring out what it means to follow Christ. They're just becoming aware of what the Kingdom looks like – dreaming dreams and seeing visions of social change. They're just realizing the cost of being a disciple, the task of a prophet, and what it will mean to keep the Way of Christ alive in the aftermath of the death of Jesus.

We don't know if the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was "called" the way that Jesus called the disciples, or if it was more like the dramatic beginning of Samuel's prophetic ministry. When Liz and I were discussing this sermon, she said she wondered if MLK ever heard a voice in his ear, "Martin, get up and be a prophet." Or if he grew into his prophetic vocation more naturally; by sitting in the pew at his father's church, studying theology, sharing the lives of his people and making connections between the Gospel and social justice. I wonder if there was ever a point at which Dr. King wished he could just go back to being a Baptist preacher. I'd be surprised if that thought never crossed his mind. But something I know about experiencing vision is that it captures you, body and soul. Most prophets don't "choose" the prophetic life – they are pursued by vision, by call, by God, and they're never really free or at peace until they align themselves with that work.

King's social activism and work on behalf of civil rights was rooted in personal spirituality. King's belief in God as the source of just action in the world guided his activism. Lewis Baldwin's book on the prayer life of Martin Luther King, Jr. points toward a man who was deeply committed to the interconnection between spirituality and activism, prayer and protest. Prophetic work must be grounded in a posture of listening. This is the story of the call of Samuel. "Speak, your servant is listening."

How do we recognize the call of God in our own lives? How do we discern what we are "called" toward, especially those of us who don't have the blessing or the curse of God's voice in our ear?? This is an odd question, in many ways. I'm at an interesting point in my own life – as I prepare to graduate and begin my career as a pastor and a teacher, I've been asked to articulate my sense of "call" several different times in the last couple of months. By that, they mean, how do I know I've been called by God to the ministry. I'm sure there are people who have really elegant

answers to this question, and can site tangible experiences or audible voices from heaven, but I am not one of those people. I cannot testify to a moment in which everything became crystal clear and the voice of God told me to be an academically-informed pastor, or a pastorally-minded academician. I can only tell you that I believe the Gospel calls us all to Jesus, to connection with God, to peace, justice, discipleship, and service. For me, there's something about feeling compelled to the work of pastor and teacher. You might call it being pursued, or captivated; it is work that I think about constantly. It is an idea I cannot escape. It's a calling I'm choosing to give myself to. Calling works itself out in different ways, in each of our lives ... depending on our ability to listen, and our capacity for vision.

I have never been woken in the night by God calling my name, but nevertheless, I believe God is speaking. I believe God speaks through the scriptures, through the worship we create when we gather together, through the stillness of nature, the Christian community, through people like MLK who were so thoroughly captured by possibility and hope, the vision of shalom that Christianity articulates, that he gave his life fighting on behalf of sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee on a spring night in 1968. The words I hear this God speak are unambiguously clear about the cost of following Jesus – the path involves suffering, rejection, and ultimately, the cross. This is the work that you and I, the followers of Christ, have been called to. The question is – are we listening to the voice of God? And if we're listening, are we willing to respond?

Will we be like King, the listening prophet who responded to the call of action on behalf of the least of these? Will we be like those who followed King? Who followed Samuel? Prophets need people who will listen and respond to their message. Not all of us are called to be prophets – we're all called to support the prophets among us, though. And here again, listening becomes critical. A prophet is not a prophet if no one is listening to them. Who are the prophets among us? In our own lives? Who are the people we know that are speaking truth to power? To listen to them, to orient ourselves in a posture of listening, is to co-create the prophetic voice. I think there are prophets right in this room, they might be our children, our teenagers, our college students, our grandparents. But their voice will matter little if no one listens to them. What would have happened if no one listened to Martin? Would a divine call to action have been enough? I doubt it. Our responsibility as people of God is to support each other and the call of God in the lives of individuals and our collective self. It is up to us to support each other in becoming who it is we've been called to be.

For all of us, that's about listening to the voice of God in prayer, acting justly and taking part in God's ongoing activity in the world. For some of us, that's about having the faith and courage to speak prophetically. For others of us, that's about listening to the prophets in our midst, identifying them and co-creating the prophetic voice with them. That's what Eli did for Samuel. That's what the disciples did for Jesus. That's what hundreds of people did for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And it's what we can still do today – our future is open. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (a prophet himself) was one of the people who listened and responded to the prophetic voice of Dr. King, drawing the connection between spirituality and action and the work we've been called to as people of faith. He wrote, "For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying."

We have the choice to engage prophetically in our world, to listen attentively to God, to speak words that are true and life-giving in the midst of oppression and despair, to support the work of the prophets among us. New beginnings are still possible – people, out of the depth of their relationship with God, rising up to fight inequity and injustice isn't

something that only happened in Bible stories or in past history. God is still ready to co-create a new thing. But we must be partners in this work. There's a text in Isaiah that reads, "Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

Do you not perceive it? That's the same word the writer chose in the story of Eli and Samuel. Eli perceived that it was God calling Samuel.

Are we perceiving God in our midst?

Are we listening to the prophets among us?

Do we really believe in the possibility of new things?

Are we willing to be the co-creators of new beginnings?

As I look around this congregation – I see Eli's and Samuel's, disciples, and prophets. I'm grateful that some of you might experience the audible voice of God in your lives, there will be those of us who will hear our call in other ways. I'm grateful for those of you who will say 'yes' to hard and difficult work. And I'm grateful for those of us who will listen to those voices as they challenge us to partner with them in action.

May we be open to the voice of the Divine in our own lives – may we have the audacity to see visions of a new and different future. May we have the capacity to say 'yes' when we're called to be prophets and may we listen well to the prophets among us. Amen.