

Who's Calling? Whose Calling?

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

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Texts: 1 Samuel 3, Psalm 139, John 1:43-51

SCRIPTURE READING 1 Samuel 3:1-10, 19-20

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 word 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." As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

GOSPEL READING John 1:43-51 In John's gospel, John the baptizer repeatedly speaks of Jesus as one greater than himself; he described his own role as preparing the way for Jesus' coming. Two of John's own disciples heard and followed Jesus. One was Andrew, who in turn called his brother, Simon, whom Jesus renamed Cephas, or Peter (meaning "rock"). Both became disciples. In today's passage, two more disciples follow the call.

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 Nathanael 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." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

In these long nights of winter, in the isolation of this pandemic, and amid our stressful political times, Bob and I have found a little brightness, a little respite, a little easing of tension right at home. We have discovered, for better or maybe for worse, that Netflix and YouTube offer some of the great old stories we have loved from long ago. For me, it's StarTrek (and that's enough about that for now). For Bob, it's the Canadian public television sitcom, *Red Green*. Red Green is the name of the hapless and hilarious main character who closes every episode by leading his friends at Possum Lodge in the Man's Prayer. It goes like this: "I'm a man. But I can change. If I have to. I guess." I'm not quite sure what makes it a prayer, but it's funny the way uncomfortable truths can be. Change is hard, and it's not just the male of the species that resists it.

This morning we heard the old story of how God called the boy Samuel to be prophet, judge, and leader of Israel. The story was already 1000 years old when Jesus and John the Baptist showed up and called their own disciples. And yet, in some ways, their stories sound like a rerun of Samuel's. Like John's mother Elizabeth, Samuel's mother Hannah was getting on in life, and still childless. Eli, the head priest, prophesied that she would conceive and bear a child. After the promise was fulfilled, Hannah brought baby Samuel back to the temple and dedicated him to God. And she sang a song that sounds like another page from Mary and Elizabeth's playbook: "The weak are lifted up, the strong cast down; the hungry are filled, the rich sent away empty. Surely God has done great things for me." The song is all about change; it's about reversals of fortune that are less welcome for some than for others. It's about afflicting the comfortable, and comfort for the afflicted.

Samuel the prophet guided Israel through a difficult patch in its history. Ultimately, his greatest act would be to anoint David as king - a role the Messiah, "of the house and line of David," was supposed to inherit. But Sam had hard words to deliver before that. The old priest Eli had erred in raising his sons. Though they were priests, they were greedy and grasping, stealing from the common people to enrich themselves. After the tender nighttime scene in the temple, when the boy Samuel finally understands that it is God calling him, he listens. And what he hears he really doesn't want to say out loud. God tells him: "Eli's sons will die, and God's blessing will turn away from Eli's family forever." A change is coming that God tells Samuel, "will make the ears of all who hear it tingle." Samuel didn't want to deliver this message of doom to his mentor, but Eli insisted. Eli even expected it. He'd been warned before. But Eli couldn't or wouldn't change. And neither did his sons. Why should they? They were content as they were. Sadly for the kingdom of Israel, the transfer of power did not happen peacefully; it was fraught by years of war and terror, with enemies both foreign and domestic arising. Samuel died before David was finally accepted as king, as he had prophesied.

Fast forward 1000 years. Look at what's happening in John's story of the call of the disciples. We have a popular leader: John the Baptist. He shows up in every account of Jesus' life. Everybody in the country is going out to him. Repenting. Now repentance doesn't necessarily lead to a change of heart or life, but ideally it goes like this: "I was wrong; I'm sorry; I can

change.” Not just, *If I have to. I guess.* “No, really. More than that. I want to change. I commit to change.” Strange to say, though, it was the poor and hungry, the oppressed people of Israel who were longing for things to change. Life was hard; something had to give. They were ready to follow John wherever, whatever.

John, like Samuel, was poised to be a great leader, but, again like Samuel, he renounced the role. Samuel named and anointed David as king. John named and baptized Jesus and pointed to him: “There’s the one to follow.” Even some of John’s own disciples did. And John promoted it. He said it flat out, “Jesus must increase and I must decrease.” It’s interesting to me that we never hear that John himself became a disciple of Jesus. His role was different, and, like Samuel, he played it well. He gathered people to himself, and then he pointed them on - a peaceful transfer of power, in this case.

And have you noticed how they came in twos? A little bit hesitantly? Andrew and Simon Peter. Philip and Nathanael. Testing the waters together; urging each other on. Hanging back, pulling forward. Wondering together. I put a label on my thoughts today. You can call it a sermon title. But really it’s a question and an invitation: Who’s calling? Whose calling? In other words, who is it who is calling? And who is being called? For Samuel, the question was, “Is it old Eli calling, or is it God? Is God really calling *me*? Shall I answer or shall I go back to sleep? Am I prepared for the hard stuff? Am I prepared to change?” This was Samuel’s question. For Andrew and Peter, Philip and Nathanael, the question was, “Is it truly the Messiah calling, or is it just another imposter? There are so many these days. And if it is the Messiah, why *us*? Are we prepared for the hard things? Are we prepared to change?”

Do you ever wonder if Jesus called anyone who just said, “No thanks”? If so, the Bible doesn’t tell us. What John does say is that there were followers who turned away. They could not or would not change. They were comfortable the way they were. Fast forward 2000 years, to 2021. So what is your question? Your invitation? Who is calling you? How can you be sure it’s the Messiah, how can you be sure the call is of God, and not one of the other insistent voices? And if it’s God calling, then why *you*? What are you being called to? Are you ready for the hard stuff? Ready to change? What is holding you back?

Can we really claim to be surprised by the tumult of this past year, these past weeks? Like Eli, we were put on notice long ago that change was coming, and that it would not be easy. MLK, prophet of the 20th century whose day we celebrate tomorrow, let us know: “Change,” he said, “does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle.” For some Americans - Black, indigenous, and people of color - the struggle goes on, day after day, without end. For some of us, it never got started. Some of us have been comfortable the way we are, and MLK’s words slide right off us. But this week I heard a powerful commentary in response to the rioting at the Capitol from some of our church leaders, among them Herbert Nelson, the Stated Clerk of the PCUSA. He said, “We do things at the risk of our own loss,

because *it's the right thing to do.*" Because, in other words, of who is calling us to do them, and because it is *our* calling. That story will be told until we get it right.

There are so many ways to be church. I can't condemn or defend any of them; people are who they are, where they are. They may celebrate numbers in worship, or new members gained, or more monies pledged, or bigger buildings built, or trendier programs offered. None of those are wrong or bad, as far as I know. There are lots of ways to be church, or not to be church.

But there is only one way to follow Jesus: when you wake in the night, to listen for a voice you don't hear in the news or on social media. A voice that is calling your name. A voice that is calling you to something you've hoped for, or maybe something you've dreaded. A voice that is telling you to take up your cross and follow, even at the risk of loss, because it's the right thing to do. It's the right thing for God's beloved children and so it's the right thing for you, too. Once in Thailand, by the sea, I met a farmer from Kansas. He had sold the farm and moved halfway around the world to build a boat and talk about Jesus. "I knew it was God calling," he said, "because I never would have thought of it on my own." Right or wrong, he was ready to change.

Now I like comfort as well as the next person. I think we all need some respite, some ease in uneasy times. But I believe we need more than comfort: I believe we need a higher purpose to find meaning in our lives. That purpose is your calling. Red, green, blue, purple, pink. It doesn't matter who you are or what color your skin -- or your politics. You belong to God. And we all belong to one another. We are all called to love one another. To work for the good of *each* other. To change for the good of all. And if God is calling us to this now, how can we say no? Amen.

Prayers

God of the ages, your voice comes to us again and again, reminding us that we belong to you and we belong to one another. May we listen with the ears of our heart for your call; may we not confuse your voice with any other; may we answer not just with willing words but with changed lives.

Cares and concerns beset the world. You know them better than we do; we don't need to list them. But in the quiet of our prayers, bring to our minds those for whom we are called to pray, those who are dear to us as well as those we don't know, but who we know are suffering. We pray for those beset by dangerous weather, or wars, or domestic violence, or economic hardship. We pray for refugees and people in struggling nations who are unlikely to see a vaccine for this virus anytime soon.

We pray for all people in our nation: so many feel disenfranchised, left behind, hurt, lied to, or stolen from. May we all take time to listen to each other; may we be slow to condemn and eager to understand, so that peace may prevail and the transition to a new administration go smoothly.

We pray for all those who have lost loved ones for any reason; may they know the peace that is beyond understanding. We ask this in the name of the one who calls us to pray, and to work, Jesus Messiah: Our Father, who art in heaven.....