

Then the Lord Called
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1 Samuel 3:1-20

¹ 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.

² At 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 he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”’ So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰ Now 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 fulfil 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 for ever, 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 for ever.’

¹⁵ Samuel 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 he 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 he told you.’ ¹⁸So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, ‘It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.’

¹⁹ As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. ²⁰And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

John 1:43-51

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’ ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip 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.’ ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ ⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’ ⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ ⁵⁰Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’ ⁵¹And 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.’

Pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

I love the story of Samuel's call. The word of the Lord was rare in those days so Samuel had no reason to suspect that the one calling out to him would be the Lord. Some might criticize Eli, a priest of the Lord, for not realizing sooner who was calling Samuel. I can't say I fault him – again, the word of the Lord was rare. So I like to give Eli credit for recognizing and then teaching Samuel that it was the Lord who was calling. Perhaps I have a soft spot in my heart for Eli for I, too, have an Eli who helped me realize it was the Lord calling to me. Philip did a similar thing for Nathanael, paving the way for him to come into contact with God-with-us, Emmanuel¹, Jesus.

And so today we read about those who have answered God's call – Samuel with “speak, your servant is listening” and Philip and Nathanael who would leave their lives behind to follow Jesus. As a nation tomorrow we honor another who followed God's call – the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. As a church here today, we give thanks for the elders and deacons being ordained and installed, who are answering God's call to each of them. And when I step back, I give thanks for all who have come before, in this very church, answering God's call upon them to be spiritual leaders, those of you who sit here today, some of *your* parents and grandparents, and further back than that. I think, too, of Mother Teresa and of all who work for social justice and of all who look out for the welfare of others and of all who faithfully do God's work in a variety of ways, even the unnoticed ones; maybe especially the ones doing God's work unnoticed, for their acts on a daily basis far outnumber the ones we notice. I imagine you could name at least twenty people who come to mind when you think of those who have answered God's call.

I suspect there are far more than twenty in and around your life who are the unnoticed, those whose answers to call aren't so apparent. And then there are those struggling to discern a call – those like Samuel the first time and the second time and the third time. Some struggle because they simply aren't sure to what God is calling them. Some struggle because they can't tell if God is calling them or their own heart's desires are tugging at them. I've been through both myself. And in my role on the Committee on Preparation for Ministry, I see firsthand the struggles. In my time on the committee, I've worked with a person who is struggling mightily to figure out, well, everything about call. He is not sure if he is being called to serve as a ruling elder or as a teaching elder or if he's even being called at all. I know that many people in his life have affirmed what they see – a clear call to ordered ministry. In my

¹ There are so many meaningful names in our readings today! Eli is “My God” (as in My God, My God, why have you forsaken me – Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani). Samuel is “God has heard.” Nathanael is “Gift from God.” And, of course, Emmanuel is “God with us.” So many layers!

time getting to know him, I have seen clearly a call to the ordered ministry of teaching elder. The committee has seen the same thing. In time, I trust he will, too, for our God is a persistent God!

This man senses God's working – I've explained that people who aren't being called don't question whether they're being called. Sometimes we just as easily miss God's call, even though it's there. As Professor Leslie J. Hoppe frames it, "Even when confronted by the Divine, it is possible for people to be oblivious to God's presence in their lives."² A theme which occasionally arises during the Wednesday Bible Study is the gift of being able to look back and see how God's work has unfolded in our lives. Sometimes we have been oblivious to God in the moment; sometimes we think God is denying us the thing we want the most. With the distance of time, we can look back and understand where God was and how God was working, how, as we trust, God was working all things for good.

In those times when we've thought God was denying us, it was easy to miss God's goodness because we were hung up on what we wanted or because we had an idea of what God did and did not do, because we had set limits on the ways God can work in our lives, limits on the ways in which we need God to work in our lives. God's work and God's call are always bigger and broader than that of which we can conceive. So, when we are our best selves, we follow little step by little step toward the person to whom God is calling us to be. Our relationship with God is not unlike the tender relationship of a parent helping a child learn to walk. Big hands around little ones, just enough support as tentative, even wobbly, step after step gets one from one place to another. And step after step has brought you to this place in your life today.

When I asked our new elders and deacons last week what made them say "yes" when asked to serve, I heard more than once that the little nudge of the ask was just what was needed. Looking back, I suspect you can identify nudges in your own life. A feature of call which is not often discussed is that it is life-long and ever-evolving. That means that the nudges don't stop; they certainly change but they don't stop. Only God can know what your next nudge will be. Samuel didn't recognize it right away but, with encouragement, he opened himself up to the call of the Lord. Today, I encourage you to be open to God's next nudge.

That might mean considering saying "yes" when your gut instinct is to say "no." Just as possibly, it could mean saying "no" instead of an automatic "yes." "Yes" to the wrong things steals the opportunity to say "yes" to the right ones. Your nudge may come far from the walls of the church, far from your home, maybe, like Nathanael, just in the midst of your daily life. Or, your nudge might come at an event like Discovery Day, the annual day of learning coordinated by the presbytery. This year, as with previous years, there is a tremendous variety of learning opportunities – from a course on science

² *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*, p. 261.

and faith to a course in photography to social media and the church to developing enriching study groups. Maybe you'll find a nudge in a course. Maybe you'll find a nudge around the table at lunch. Maybe you'll find a nudge in our worship or in the time with the keynote speaker, Carol Howard-Merritt. Maybe you'll even find a nudge during the drive to Mequon. I can't know any more than you from where your next nudge will come but I encourage you to consider Discovery Day as one possibility. Another might be in one of the books in our library in the Oak Room, with a broad selection from which to borrow. Another might be in the Adult Education opportunity beginning in February. And just as plausibly, your next nudge might come in the midst of your regular routine. Oh, that God would give us the ears to hear.

Let us pray: Holy God, we pray you speak that we might be listening, with your help. Amen.