

# 'SPEAK, LORD, FOR YOUR SERVANT IS LISTENING'

1 Samuel 3: 1-10, John 1: 43-51

Have you ever heard God calling? Some of you may think you have. Some of you may not be sure whether some call in your life was from God, but you'd like to believe it was. And some of you may not have any sense of what I am asking. And so, what I want to speak about today is the call of God. How do we know God is calling? What does it sound like? How do we respond?

Our readings today address this theme in a very direct way. In the case of Samuel, it is the call of God. In the case of Nathaniel, it is the call of Jesus. In both cases, however, we are dealing with the call of the divine on our lives. How does it happen? When does it happen? How can we place ourselves in that state of heart and mind where we can respond effectively and affirmatively to such a call? This is our theme today.

And we begin with Samuel. Samuel was one of those great prophet/priests of Israel. It was Samuel who anointed Saul, the first King of Israel, and it was Samuel who anointed David, the most famous king of Israel. Under Samuel's spiritual leadership, Israel experienced a period of growth and strength it had never known before and would never know afterward. And yet, all of this began when Samuel was a young boy. His mother Hannah had prayed and prayed and prayed for a child. In those days women who couldn't bear children were made to feel even more inadequate than they would today.

This is because there were few roles women could assume in ancient society, and the most important of these was, without a doubt, that of being a mother. Imagine not being able to bear a child. So, Hannah prayed and prayed and prayed. And Hannah also made a vow to God. 'Grant me the gift of a child and I will offer the child up to your service dear God.' And amazingly, miraculously, Samuel was born. And true to her word, Hannah raised him until he was self-sufficient, and then she took him to the temple and offered him up for service under the care of Eli, the chief priest.

Now our story continues. We are told in our reading that in those days the word of the Lord was rare and visions were not widespread. This means that it was a time of little hope and little inspiration. People didn't dream big dreams and people didn't imagine great things. But leave it to a child to dream and vision. Samuel was indeed a child. And so, we are told that Samuel, under the care of Eli, was sleeping, and while sleeping he hears his name being called out: 'Samuel! Samuel!' Of course, Samuel assumes the most rational explanation to this calling out of his name - 'Eli is calling me so I must answer.' And so, Samuel gets up and goes to Eli's room to see what it is Eli wants. The mystery, of course, is that Eli hasn't called Samuel at all. He tells the boy that he must have heard something in his dream and to go back to sleep. Samuel does just that.

But then it happens again: 'Samuel! Samuel!' And this time our reading gives us a clue as to what is going on. We read the following: 'Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.' So, God is calling Samuel and Samuel doesn't know it. God is seeking Samuel out and Samuel has no experience of God in this first-hand kind of way. Of course, we too would question ourselves if we heard our name being called out, wouldn't we, even if it was through a dream? If we couldn't find a rational explanation for where the voice was coming from or its recurrence and persistence through our dreaming, we would still resist the thought that there was anything more mysterious or divine going on.

So, Samuel goes back to Eli and enquires what it is Eli wants. But Eli hasn't called him. Back to bed he goes once again. Finally, it happens a third time and this time Eli senses that something else is going on. The temple is a place of sacred mystery. Even though little transcendent has happened there for a long time, perhaps, inspiration and grace, hope and renewal may come back yet again. 'Listen', Eli tells the boy, 'Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'...

'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.' But what does this mean? First of all, it means that even though God may call, God will not speak to us unless God is invited to speak to us. Second it means that we cannot hear God speaking to us unless we are open and ready to follow. The very word Samuel is given to describe himself - that of a servant - implies a readiness to follow and act on that which he will be told. A servant is ready to do whatever his master is bidding him to do. Unless we are ready to be open, to listen, and then to follow, we can never really hear God calling us. We resist the call internally for we are not ready to hear it with the ears of our soul.

Well, you may be thinking, I may have dreams but I never imagine that it is through my dreams that God is calling me. Of course not. Dreams may have their place of truth-telling in our lives, but dreams are not the only way God calls us. God calls us through every situation and circumstance, every challenge and opportunity, every relationship and responsibility. God is calling us if we but open ourselves to hear that still small voice within us. If we stop long enough from our restless busyness and stubborn repetition of the same old, same old; if we stop long enough from the familiar patterns of speaking and behaving and planning; if we stop long enough to listen through another person, a circumstance, an anxiety, a challenge or opportunity, chances are we will hear with new clarity where we should go and what we should do, how we must choose and whom we should serve.

God is calling us all the time, in the little things and in the big things. God is calling out our name and waiting to hear our response. Will we respond like Samuel or will we respond by saying things like: 'Later God, I'm too busy now; I've got things much too important to do right now; I don't have time; I've got too much on my plate; I'm far too attached to the way things are at the moment to contemplate any change of direction or different options for my life; I'm too scared or comfortable to change anything right now... I'll just put up with the status quo and hope for the best...' O the many ways we respond to God's call and respond in ways that are neither life-giving nor life-affirming. 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.' God is calling you and God is calling me. How will we respond? Will we be open, ready to listen, ready to follow? Or will we continue to dull ourselves and our consciences to God's voice until we too, like Israel in those days, no longer hear a word from the Lord, until we too no longer dream dreams in which God is speaking to us?

So then, being open, listening and following, these are key ways of responding to God's call. But there is also something else we need, and this is given us in our gospel reading. Here, the call of God comes through Jesus, and it comes to a fellow Israelite named Nathaniel. And what is it about Nathaniel that makes him ready to be called? It is not so much his openness, his ability to listen, nor is it his willingness to follow. These are all very important to be sure, but there is something else that is important as well. What is it?

We read that when Jesus saw Nathaniel coming toward him, he said to him, "Here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" The Greek word is *dolos*, and it conveys a sense of dishonesty or lack of transparency. How can God call someone who is not willing to be honest with himself, let alone others? How can God call someone who is not transparent in her motives and free to be who she is in the presence of the Holy One who surrounds our every waking and sleeping moment?

Jesus knew that he had important things to communicate to these followers he was calling. They needed to be honest with themselves and with him. There was no room for games, for dishonesty, for deceit. There was no room for making choices because of political correctness or whether it was going to be a good career move. There was no room for saying yes or no depending on whether Jesus would be part of the winning side in society. There was only room to say yes if yes captured one's heart and soul, if yes opened one up to possibilities for being and acting in the world that were life-giving. There was only room to say yes if yes would lead one into the truth of oneself as made in God's love and made for serving that love in whatever ways open in one's life.

We are all different people with different gifts, talents, abilities and disabilities. We have different personalities and different strengths and weaknesses of character. We have different histories and different kinds of relationships that nourish and challenge our souls. But each and every one of us is called by God in some way and along some path. The end of that path is the same even if the way there may be different. I may do it through my workplace, through my home, through my community involvement or through my children, but the end goal is that the love of God should be served in and through my life. And in order to serve the love of God concretely and practically I need certain key qualifications, qualifications that are open to everyone to receive. I need to be open; I need to listen; and I need to follow the truth of the vision I'm given. And I need to be honest with myself and others. I need to be sincere in my openness to God. And I need the courage to bind myself to God's call when that call becomes clear in my soul.

Where are the challenges or opportunities in each of our lives? Is it in a particular relationship or a particular circumstance? Is it that we don't yet have clarity as to what we must do, or is it that we don't want to face what we must do? Is it that we lack courage to take the first step or is it fear that the consequences to our decisions will fill us with regret down the line? Are we much too apathetic to the situations of life around us, or are we far too anxious, needing to learn to let go and let be? O the questions are endless, but they must be asked. For in asking such questions honestly and openly, we place ourselves in a space where God may speak to us in a way we have not heard before. We are all very different, this is true. But we are all called to be children of God with an intimate communion with our maker and redeemer whose face has been shown us in Jesus, and whose energy flow must find free passage in and through us.

Prayer: Dear God, open me to your voice... Teach me to listen... Give me the courage to follow... Make me free from the opinions and judgements of others... Remove any obstacles from your free flow through me... Amen.