

“Who’s Calling?”

I Samuel 3:1-10

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This is the second in a two-part series on “call.” We are forever calling upon God. We’ve made a virtue of it by calling it prayer, although it may be anything but true prayer. True prayer involves a submission to God. Much of our prayer asks God to submit to us. We may dial up the Divine out of panic: we’re in a crisis; or out of laziness: we ask God to do what we’re too bone idle to handle; or out of habit: “Now I lay me down to sleep” . . . “Our Father, who art in heaven.” It’s not our fault. Our preachers have urged such behavior upon us. Let’s blame them! The alternative would be to blame ourselves or to amend our ways, and both of these fixes are unpalatable.

I suggested last week that God initiates calls, that God wants to make contact, that God has something to say, that communication with God may begin when we listen, rather than when we speak. I said that the Bible from cover to cover

insists that God is the seeker, that human beings were created because God wanted conversation, that ever since Adam and Eve, God has been calling in the cool of the day or the heat of the night, and humankind has largely been dodging the calls. A notable exception was Samuel, our boy hero for the day, who was not looking for a call from God, but who was listening one night when God came calling.

Let me sketch a brief background for this story. Samuel’s mother was a young woman, troubled because she was barren. She prayed to the Lord for a child, promising to commit the child to God’s service. To her delight, she conceived and bore a boy child. True to her promise, after she had weaned him, she took him to the shrine at Shiloh and left him to be reared by the ancient and nearly blind priest, Eli.

My friend and former colleague, the Rev. Dr. David Belt, has written what I think is a charmingly folksy account of how the call of Samuel unfolded. I share part of it here, with David’s permission.

About a divine call: *How do you know it's the Lord? Samuel didn't. Eli, the nearly blind old priest, he didn't, at least not at first. At first he thought the boy was imagining things.*

"Go back to bed, boy!" So Samuel went, puzzling. The boy wasn't imagining things! "Samuel!" There it is again! Surely old Eli must be wanting me this time

Old Eli didn't want him. Didn't want to be bothered, either! "Go on back to bed, boy, a'fore I take my cane to your backside!" Samuel must have mumbled this time. Even God's called-folks gotta mumble sometimes. "It's bad enough to be stuck in this musty old place, but now the old coot I'm stuck here with is a couple of sandwiches short of a picnic.

The bed beckoned; the boy laid down. "I hope this doesn't go on all night!" Head on pillow, eyes open, ears cocked for sounds. Sleepy. Sleepier. Asleep.

"Samuel!" "Huh." "Samuel!!" "Who?" Samuel!!!" "What . . . what d'ya want? Oh,

man, not again!"

Trudge, trudge, trudge . . . "Here I am, Eli, what do you want?" Now Eli's light had indeed faded, but his wick was not entirely used up. He got it this time. The God who meddles is at it again.

"Now boy, you listen here! You go lay down again, 'cause it ain't me calling you. It's the Lord. "Yeah, right! This is some kind of initiation, isn't it?" Samuel musta thought Eli's train had slipped a cog. "It's the Lord; yeah, sure!"

"Do what I say, boy! Go lay down and when you hear it again, your name being called, say 'Speak, for I'm listening.' Now do what I say and don't forget a thing the Lord says! I'll be waiting for a full accounting!"

Trudge, trudge, trudge. "This old bird's only got one leg on the perch. 'The Lord.' "Yeah, right."

This time the bed didn't beckon. This time

Samuel wanted to stay awake. Nothing happened Nothing happened. "Okay, so I'll lay down, just for a moment. "Samuel!" "Should I answer?" "SAMUEL!" "SPEAK LORD, I'M LISTENING!"

I've told you more than once that my Grandpa Holcomb was a Methodist Minister, active for 42 years and for 7 more as a hospital chaplain after he retired. I had the great good fortune to live 2 blocks from him when he moved to Hannibal immediately after he retired. The Christmas I was 8 years old he gave me a little King James New Testament, writing on the fly leaf: "Kenny, this is a good book. I hope you like it. Tucked inside the front cover was a scrap of paper on which he wrote: "Read I Samuel 3."

Well, First Samuel is not IN the New Testament, so I had to find a Bible and dig around in the Old Testament until I found it. Of course, the tacit suggestion in the note was that God sometimes calls little boys, too. I don't recall that Grandpa ever said a word about my becoming a minister, but the seed of an idea

was planted, and in due time it germinated, sprouted, and grew. To shift the metaphor, I was drawn like a moth to flame.

Let's take another case in point. Since this weekend we are celebrating Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday—now a national holiday—let us take a few moments to consider his life with this question in mind: Was King called to his life's work or not?

Born January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, he would have been 91 last Wednesday. He was called as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama in 1954. Within a year he completed his Ph.D. at Boston University in Massachusetts, celebrated the birth of his first child, become President of the Montgomery Improvement Association, and become a national figure, leading what turned out to be a successful 381-day strike against the Montgomery Bus Co., in the wake of Rosa Parks arrest for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man. Clearly, Dr. King was on a fast track to somewhere!

In the short span of ten years, Martin Luther King, Jr.:

- spearheaded the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)
- led the famed 1963 March on Washington (and many other marches)
- pushed for the successful passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964
- was named Time Magazine's Man of the Year
- and received the Nobel Peace Prize.

For his trouble he also:

- had his home bombed with his wife and infant daughter inside
- received countless death threats
- was stoned for leading a peaceful civil rights march
- was repeatedly jailed
- was hounded by the FBI (Director Herbert Hoover hated him.)
- was harassed by the Internal Revenue Service
- hassled by local police
- and was shot dead in Memphis, Tennessee

at the age of 39.

Obviously, King was not universally admired. Indeed, like every human being, he had his flaws, his foibles, his frailties; but the question we are considering concerns his call. It seems to me there are four possibilities.

Either:

1. he was an accident of history. He just happened to be at the right place at the right time for the mantle of leadership to fall upon his shoulders, or
2. he was fated/destined for this role, and he had no choice but to meet his Kismet, or
3. he was an opportunist, a shameless self-promoter, willing "to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" to garner headlines and claim fame, or
4. he was called by God to his work, and he answered the call.

Which was it? You decide. Still, even if you admit the possibility of a human getting a divine call, it may come by way of another person, like Queen Esther hearing the voice of old Mordecai,

challenging her to intercede for her captive people with her husband, the king. Mordecai said, "You may have been born for just such a moment as this!"

There might be a persistent voice inside your head, within your heart, in the pit of your stomach, around the edges of your consciousness, that whispers or shouts or drums out the one necessary thing you must do before you die. Could this be the voice of God? The call does not depend upon your worthiness but your willingness. The next time you feel as if God can't use you, remember the following people—all of whose stories are told in the Bible.

- Noah was a drunk.
- Abraham and Sarah were too old; so were Elizabeth and Zachariah.
- Isaac was a daydreamer.
- Jacob was a liar and a cheat.
- Leah was ugly.
- Joseph was vain, abandoned and enslaved.
- Moses was a murderer and had a speech impediment.

- Gideon was afraid and may have been the village idiot.
- Samson was a womanizer.
- Rahab, an ancestor of Jesus, was a prostitute.
- Samuel, Jeremiah, and Timothy were too young.
- David had an affair, had the woman's husband killed, and had a dysfunctional family.
- Elijah was suicidal.
- Jonah ran from God.
- Naomi was a widow and without a country.
- Job was disease-ridden and went bankrupt.
- John the Baptist ate bugs.
- Mary, the mother of Jesus, was pregnant out of wedlock.
- The disciples fell asleep on the night that Jesus needed them most to be alert.
- Peter denied Christ three times the same night.
- Martha worried about everything.
- Mary Magdalene was mentally ill.
- The Samaritan woman was divorced five times.
- Zacchaeus was too short and was a

dishonest government bureaucrat.

- Paul was hot-tempered, judgmental, and overly religious.
- And Lazarus was dead!

If you listen to that inner voice, you may be surprised at what you hear. It will not be a crank call. It will not be a telemarketer, trying to sell you something you already have or something you don't want or need. You won't have to ask who's calling, because what you hear will be your own true voice, maybe for the very first time. It may be a shout or a whisper, not a seductive but an instructive voice, a voice that says, "Follow your bliss! Pursue your passion! Be what you were born to be! Do not despise your life by wasting it on what is unworthy of you! Do what you were made to do! Never mind the cost!

Bliss? Passion? Yes! A passionate anonymous author, addressing Hebrew Christians in dispersion in Asia Minor long ago asked them to remember a passionate Jesus:

Let us also lay aside every weight . . . and

Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus . . . who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God! (Hebrews 12:1,2)

And the Lord came and stood forth, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for thy servant hears."

