

January 14, 2018

"God Calling"

1 Samuel 3: 1-10, *Common English Bible*

Now the boy Samuel was serving the LORD under Eli. The LORD's word was rare at that time, and visions weren't widely known. One day Eli, whose eyes had grown so weak he was unable to see, was lying down in his room. God's lamp hadn't gone out yet, and Samuel was lying down in the LORD's temple, where God's chest was.

The LORD called to Samuel. "I'm here," he said.

Samuel hurried to Eli and said, "I'm here. You called me?"

"I didn't call you," Eli replied. "Go lie down." So he did.

Again the LORD called Samuel, so Samuel got up, went to Eli, and said, "I'm here. You called me?"

"I didn't call, my son," Eli replied. "Go and lie down."

(Now Samuel didn't yet know the LORD, and the LORD's word hadn't yet been revealed to him.)

A third time the LORD called Samuel. He got up, went to Eli, and said, "I'm here. You called me?"

Then Eli realized that it was the LORD who was calling the boy. So Eli said to Samuel, "Go and lie down. If he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD. Your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down where he'd been.

Then the LORD came and stood there, calling just as before, "Samuel, Samuel!" Samuel said, "Speak. Your servant is listening."

There have been wrong number calls as long as there has been phones, but technology now allows us to make wrong number texts, too. I made one, once. I was asking someone something about a vacation I was taking, and accidentally sent it to the wrong number. I knew it was wrong when the reply was something like, "What??!!" I sent another text, apologizing, and because I know how these things work for the younger generation, I also sent a picture of my dog, Lupi, with the message, "Here's a pic of a cute dog for your trouble." The unknown person responded with laughing emojis and wished me safe travels.

Another time I received a wrong number text. I politely let the sender know they had the wrong number, and then the sender initiated a conversation. I participated because I just had one of those feelings...like the Holy Spirit was in this somehow. I could tell I was texting a young person, probably female. She was quite curious about who exactly she had reached. I shared that I was a 50-year-old pastor, and she was surprised. The conversation ended with her wishing me well, and I wished blessings on her day. My feeling told me that this was somehow important. Can God word through a wrong number text? Why not?!

I'm bringing this up because of our scripture today. The boy Samuel has gone to bed in the worship center, where he works with his mentor, the priest Eli. He hears a voice calling him, but thinks it's Eli. He took the call, but thought it was the wrong number. After this happened three times, Eli realizes that it must be God calling Samuel. He tells the boy to take the call, and who it was from. In this way, Samuel began his career as a prophet of God.

We really can't blame Samuel for being confused. Don't we often make the same mistake? We hear God calling, and we even answer, but sometimes think it's the wrong number—God's not really calling us. This call was meant for someone else. Or we take the call, but think that somehow we accidentally dialed ourselves. It's not really God, just a random thought in our own head.

I experienced this myself in my call to ministry. I heard the phone ringing, and got the text, but it didn't occur to me that it was from God. And I actually investigated changing to other careers, never imagining that insistent ring tone was a call to be a pastor.

One thing the story of Samuel tells us is that even though we may not be tuned in, God still calls and speaks to us. Our scripture says, "The LORD's word was rare at that time, and visions weren't widely known." It was the time of the Judges, when, "All the people did what was right in their own eyes." (1 Samuel 21:25) That meant that they didn't do what was right in God's eyes. And Eli had to be woken up three times before he realized it was God who was speaking to Samuel.

So, just because you think you don't hear God, or your not actively listening, it doesn't mean God isn't speaking to you. God always speaks; it's just that sometimes we are deaf to his words.

Also, getting a call from God isn't always about good news. Some calls are tough, or begin in sorrow. After answering God, the first message Samuel received was that Eli's family would be punished. Eli had two rotten sons who cursed God, and God told Samuel that Eli's heritage would not be redeemed because of this.

Have you ever gotten a call from God that wasn't all good news? My call to ministry was a good thing, but it meant some hardship. My family and I took a huge financial hit from seminary and leaving psychology. My time with my family has been decreased because of my role as pastor. Itinerancy complicates my life. That doesn't mean I regret it; in fact, I can't imagine not

following the call that has brought so much joy and meaning to my life. It just means that discipleship is costly.

And people have all different kinds of callings. Samuel was called to be a prophet. I was called to be a pastor. You are called to something, too. I was with Mark and Nicole Alcorn this week at a pastor appreciation brunch sponsored by the Gideons. One of the speakers made the point that being a Gideon is a calling—people are called by God to fulfill the role of Gideon, and spread God’s word to the world in that way. Aren’t we blessed that people in our church are called to be musicians, ushers, soup kitchen workers, givers, and so much more?

The calls that we hear and respond to can be short or long. Last week, some good folks from our congregation answered a call to undecorate the building from Christmas. A bunch gathered, worked, and got ‘er done. They even did more work than was really necessary. And then that calling was completed. Other people answer calls that are more long term. Our organist, Judy Bradac, has been following this call for 35 years! I’m sure that occasionally it’s an inconvenience to follow the call of being a church organist, but she has been faithful. And how much blessing has come to so many people because of her willingness to answer God with a resounding “Yes!”

John Seybert was the first bishop of the Evangelical Church. This is one of the ancestors of what later became the United Methodist Church. He was born in 1791, went into ministry in 1820, and was named a bishop in 1839. Back then, being a bishop meant that you worked harder and traveled more than the circuit riders. So he worked and traveled, logging around 175,000 miles with his horse and wagon. We learn from his journals that along the way, he preached 9850 sermons, did 46,000 pastoral calls, and led 8000 prayer meetings. Bishop Seybert helped found congregations all over the Midwest, gave away money out of his own pocket, and brought German-language Christian literature to people all over the frontier who had no other way to get it. For all his efforts, he received \$100 per year, and paid all his own expenses out of it.

His original vocation was cooper—the guy who makes barrels—and he earned a decent salary doing it. But, he thought he heard God calling him into ministry. He wasn’t sure of what he heard though, and delayed his answer. Eventually though, he wrote this in his journal:

I [finally] determined, if it be God's will, to labor in his vineyard with my Evangelical brethren. I should have gone sooner, had I been certain that the Lord wanted me to go. However, I had no rest at my cooperage, and concluded that the only way to get into the clear concerning this matter, was to make an effort. If the Lord blesses my labor with the awakening and conversion of sinners, and the edification and encouragement of saints, I determined I would serve him in this way with all my ability, wherever I might have to go, whatever crosses I might have to bear, and however long the task might last.

We could call this the “Seybert method” for discerning if it’s really God calling you. Seybert wasn’t sure, so he decided to start out in the direction he thought God wanted him to go. He

thought that if he was wrong, he would simply fail to find fruit. Well, that never happened. Instead, Bishop Seybert changed lives, and went on to make a huge difference for Jesus.

We can use the Seybert method, too. It's how I got started on the path to ministry. I took a few small steps, and doors just kept opening. I realized I was being called into ministry in January. In February, my pastor, Rev. Dick Wisdom said he wanted to take me to his seminary and show me around. That sounded interesting, so I agreed to go. Not long after we arrived, I was sitting in the office of the Dean of Admissions, and I realized she was interviewing me. After that was over, I was back with Dick, and I said to him, "This isn't a tour! It's an interview, isn't it?" My answer was his burst of laughter. The joke was on me, because in September I started attending!

You can make the Seybert method work for you. Do you have an idea, or feel like a certain ministry is interesting to you? Just start. Take one or two small steps in that direction. Are doors opening or closing? Is there fruit? Where are these nudges taking you? Ministry is rarely all-or-nothing, and never irreversible. Just make a beginning of it and see where it leads you.

Samuel heard God, but thought it was a wrong number at first. God is calling us all the time. Do you think he's got the wrong number? The wrong servant? Be assured that your deaf ear or doubts aren't going to make him stop the calls.

And it might be a hard call, a difficult call that will take you out of your comfort zone. Well, most things worth doing are hard. Discipleship has its costs and its rewards.

You will probably be called to do something completely different than your neighbor. That's why we're the body of Christ together. Differently gifted and called, we make up a complete body of ministry.

You will experience many different calls in your life. Some of them will be short-lived, but some may take you a lifetime. Both types are holy.

And don't forget the Seybert method. Just start. Take a few steps in what looks like the right direction, and then discern. Is God leading you farther in? or in a different direction?

If you do get that call from God, hit the "accept" button, and say, "Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening."

References:

[http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl\\_display.asp?installment\\_id=93041082](http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93041082)