

“UNEXPECTED CALL, UNIDENTIFIED CALLER”

1 Samuel 3:1-20; John 1:43-51

A Sermon by John Thomason

Woodbury UMC

January 17, 2021

I suspect all of us have mixed feelings about the place of technology in our daily lives. You and I are increasingly dependent on our personal gadgets and find them to be helpful; but they can also be tiresome, annoying, and difficult to master. Computers and cellphones are constantly being upgraded, and it's impossible to keep up with all the changes. A new, improved I-phone just makes my life more complicated.

However, there is one innovation in technology for which I am eternally grateful: caller ID. I like being able to screen incoming phone calls, to separate the wheat from the chaff on the other end of the line. During a busy day, I'm always happy to hear from one of you; but the last thing I want is an unexpected call from an unidentified caller who is trying to sell me beachfront property in Arizona!

The story in today's Old Testament lesson is obviously set in a time before the advent of caller ID. This is one of many "call stories" recorded in the Bible. God repeatedly calls specific individuals and communities to a special vocation. Sometimes the call is direct, clear, and unmistakable. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus calls Philip to be his disciple with the simple words, "Follow me" (John 1:43). Jesus and Philip stand face-to-face; there can be no question in Philip's mind about who is calling him and what he is being called to do. But there are other times when God's call is shrouded in mystery; it evokes a response of confusion, doubt, and fear. This is because the call is unexpected, and the caller is unidentified.

We see this pattern especially in the call of the Old Testament prophets. The first person designated to be a prophet is Moses, who is living on the lam in the land of Midian trying to mind his own business, which is tending sheep. Suddenly a voice speaks to him out of a burning bush, calling him to return to Egypt and liberate his people from slavery. The call comes totally out of the blue, and the caller is at first unknown to Moses.

In today's story, the young boy Samuel is fast asleep when he hears someone calling out to him. One might suppose he would readily recognize the voice as coming from God. Samuel is an assistant to the old priest Eli; he has the advantage of living and working in the temple where God's voice is routinely heard. But the biblical writer tells us that "Samuel [does] not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord [has] not yet been revealed to him" (1 Samuel 3:7). Samuel is like a child who grows up in the church and is familiar with the rituals of religion but does not yet have a personal faith, who has not yet heard or responded to God's claim on his or her life.

And so, when Samuel hears his phone ringing in the middle of the night, the call is unexpected, and the caller is unidentified. He naturally assumes that the voice is Eli's. As the story is usually told from this point on, it moves toward a happy ending. Samuel eventually identifies the caller, listens to the caller's request, and responds obediently. The punch line is memorable and moving: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (v. 9). This is the sweet story most of us have heard since we were in second grade Sunday School.

But I have to tell you: today, I'm hearing this story in a different way than I have before, because this is a unique time in my own life and a unique time in the life of our nation. There is a tension in the story of Samuel and Eli that corresponds to the tension I am feeling and which I suspect all of us are feeling at this moment.

For starters, what we see here is a generational shift, a changing of the guard, a passing of the torch from an older religious professional to a younger one. You and I are keenly aware that such a shift will soon take place in the Woodbury United Methodist Church. I will retire from full-time ministry at the end of June and pass the mantle to someone younger. This change will likely be more welcome to you than to me, but it will bring challenges and uncertainties for all of us.

In the transition of leadership from Eli to Samuel, there is not only a generational shift; there is a new type of ministry being introduced into the temple. Old Eli is a priest, whose job it is to perpetuate the traditions of Israelite religion. Eli is a “company man,” performing his prescribed duties without deviation. He represents the establishment, the status quo, and at his advanced age he doesn’t want to disturb the way things are. He is like a Methodist pastor on the verge of retirement who is just playing out the string, who has run out of things to say and simply repeats old sermons, who is too tired or afraid to rock the boat from the pulpit or anywhere else. The biblical writer tells us that Eli’s eyesight is failing, which is a symbolic way of saying that he has lost whatever spiritual vision he once had. And this has serious consequences: Eli’s lack of vision makes him a poor mentor to his sons who follow him into the priesthood; they are corrupt to the core and are even “blaspheming God” (v. 13).

Samuel, of course, is also one of Eli’s proteges. But there is an important distinction: Samuel is not called to be a priest; he is called to be a prophet. Now, unfortunately, the term “prophet” is constantly subject to misunderstanding. In popular thinking, a prophet is a fortune-teller, a seer who predicts the future. But in the Bible, a prophet is one who has keen insight into the here and now. He reads the signs of the times, hears God’s word for these times, and proclaims God’s word to the people. This sounds like a desirable vocation, except that the word from God a prophet is called to proclaim is a word most of his listeners don’t want to hear. No wonder Jesus observes that “prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house” (Mark 6:4).

In the Old Testament, when priests stand in the pulpit, they are like genial cowboys at “home on the range . . . where seldom is heard a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy all day.” When prophets stand in the pulpit, they bring a mixed message. The job of prophets is both “to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.” Yes, sometimes they bring a word of comfort and hope, but it is only after they have issued warnings of judgment and disaster, after their warnings go unheeded, and after their deaf listeners suffer a great fall.

The young boy Samuel is called not to be a priest, but to be a prophet, and his first assignment is a tough one – to deliver a word of judgment on the house of Eli, on the fat-cat clergy who are not only unfaithful in their practice of religion but are also in cahoots with the crooked political establishment. In ancient Israel, priests and kings are often cozy bedfellows, illicit lovers; priests whisper sweet nothings into the ears of kings, telling them what they want to hear. Whatever call from God the priests once received has been corrupted by the call from kings to compromise and conform.

Prophets like Samuel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah have a very different calling: their ministry is located in both the temple and the palace; they hold both priests and kings accountable. Which means they enter a no-man’s land where many people of faith don’t want to go: they deliberately mix religion and politics.

Now, let’s be clear about this: the Old Testament prophets don’t delve into politics in a partisan way. Their loyalty is not to a specific politician or party. To put it in present-day terms, their loyalty is not to Donald Trump or Joe Biden, to the color red or the color blue; their loyalty is to God and God alone. They seek to hear the voice of God, to know the will of God, and to reflect the mind of God to the people of God. This inevitably draws them into social and political issues about which there is controversy and disagreement – issues like income disparity, welfare policy, and criminal justice. But again, the prophets’ views are shaped not by self-interest or personal bias but by a standard outside themselves – by the covenant

established between God and Israel, by the word of God in Scripture, by the biblical ethic that strives for both personal righteousness and the common good.

It was not lost on me that the tragic events in Washington, D.C., last week transpired on January 6, the Day of Epiphany in the Christian Church. A day that celebrates light coming into darkness was shadowed by a darkness of apocalyptic proportions. We saw a violent insurrection at the nation's Capitol building; a few days later we saw an American president being impeached for the second time and an inauguration taking shape surrounded by an armed camp. If I am any kind of prophet at all, even an old and timid one, I have an obligation to tell you – and you have a right to know – where I stand in relation to these events.

We as the Church have an obligation to speak out as well, because the Church is both priest and prophet to the surrounding culture. We don't just comfort the afflicted; we afflict the comfortable. We don't just say what everybody already believes or what makes everybody feel good; we say things that contradict the norms of culture, even if it makes a lot of people squirm. Why? Because we do what prophets do: we speak with, about, and for God. Our concern is not to be on the winning side, but to speak the truth, God's truth.

But, ay, there's the rub! Sometimes, even within the Church, what is truth to one person is falsehood to another – especially on matters of politics. I'm quite sure there are persons in our congregation who believe the results of the presidential vote were tainted, that President Trump has been mistreated both before and after November 3, and that strategies must still be pursued to ensure a rightful outcome to the election. I know there are others in our congregation who believe the president lost the election fair and square, that he incited last week's insurrection, and that he should be removed from office even before the prescribed transition of power, which we can only hope will be peaceful. That's the agony of it: even among committed Christians, what is an obvious fact to one person is "fake news" to another. One recalls the famous question Pontius Pilate asks at the trial of Jesus: "What is truth?" – when we all have such differing takes on the truth.

Our disagreements suggest to me that what you and I call "truth" is often subjective, shaped by ideas that originate in our own minds and hearts rather than coming from an objective standard that would reveal our blind spots. I would wager that all of us, including me, spend more time listening to CNN or Fox News than we do listening to the word of God in Scripture. The prophets would say to us, "You're all blind and deaf and damned."

In this critical moment, you and I need to be rigorously honest with ourselves and, at the same time, develop a capacity for discernment when we hear the views of others. If it's any consolation, this is also a challenge during Old Testament times, because it's not just priests and prophets who disagree; the prophets themselves are not of the same mind. Prophet A would stand on one corner saying, "We are to obey the king, no matter what kind of scoundrel he is. This is the will of God." Prophet B would stand on the opposite corner saying, "The king is corrupt and must go. This is the will of God." How are God's people to know which prophet speaks the truth? Well, their Scriptures instruct them to "test the spirits," to weigh human truth-claims against the claims of the divine. The way God's people keep from speaking only a measure of truth is to have a measure for truth. On the basis of God's word, they make an informed decision and then proclaim the truth that has been revealed to them.

Friends, here is the truth as best I can discern it. By any Scriptural standard, it is unacceptable for a government official to peddle lies that mislead the public, inflame hatred, and incite insurrection. It is both a sin and a crime for gullible, crazed people to take the law into their own hands to overturn a duly elected government and destroy lives and public property. This is an objective truth, a truth that should be indisputable for any serious Christian.

I will also venture to share my personal truth, recognizing that it may differ from yours. Bi-partisan officials in all fifty states have certified that there was no voter fraud sufficient to change the outcome of the election. I've weighed their testimony and accepted their findings. And so, I've come to the sad conclusion that the current president either has told lies deliberately to advance his own cause, or is so deluded that he cannot distinguish between truth and falsehood. Either way, the results have been catastrophic for our country.

If you find my conclusions offensive, rest assured that I'm an equal opportunity offender. Lest you think I am picking on President Trump alone, I'll be quick to point out that deceptive behaviors are not exclusive to one person or one political tribe. There have been presidents in both parties who have lived a lie in their personal lives and told lies to the public about their policies. And so, I don't mean to offend only those who are unwavering in their support of President Trump. I mean to offend anyone who looks at politics through the filter of personal bias or blind loyalty rather than through the clear lens of Scripture. I'm also willing to admit that my own vision may be as poor as Eli's.

One of our thoughtful church members sent me a text message last Thursday with the photo of a home-made sign sitting on a stand next to a window which looks out on a parking lot. I'm guessing the sign was posted inside a church building. The sign read: "During the next 6 days, don't let the elephants and the donkeys make you forget you belong to the Lamb."

Let's not forget how Samuel replies to the unidentified caller: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Over the past week, when we've all been talking our heads off about insurrection, impeachment, and inauguration, have any of us stopped for one moment to listen to what God might have to say about all this?

And have we really listened to one another? Did you catch how Samuel came to realize that the voice he was hearing was the voice of God? He learned it from Eli, the old, worn-out priest who had lost his prophetic vision; in other words, he learned it from someone who was very different from himself. The story of Samuel and Eli reminds us that hearing the word of the Lord is a communal effort. Samuel would not have recognized the voice of the Lord had it not been for Eli's wisdom and experience. Eli would not have known that God was doing a new thing in Israel had it not been for the young Samuel. They loved and trusted each other enough to listen and learn from each other. Together they discerned the way forward.

Like the writer of 1 Samuel, you and I may feel that the word of the Lord is rare in our day, since few of us awake in the night to hear God calling our names. But God is still speaking; and God's voice is often best heard not in privacy but in community. As Samuel and Eli demonstrate, we get at the truth together. Is it possible that God is raising up different voices in your life, in our church, and in our world, to reveal to you something you could not know by yourself?