

## WE ARE ALL CALLED

I Samuel 3:1-10

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3 June 2018

His mother Hannah had begged God for a child. She'd made a bargain with God, in fact, not something that is particularly recommended, but she did. "Please let me have a child," she prayed, "and if I do, I will give him to God's service." As it happened, Hannah became pregnant, and had a son whom she named Samuel. Hannah kept her promise. When Samuel was still very young, she took him to the temple where he became an assistant to the priest named Eli.

One night, Samuel wakes up because he hears his name being called. "Samuel, Samuel." He runs into Eli's room, thinking the old priest needs something. "Go back to bed, child, I didn't call you." They both thought Samuel was dreaming. And then it happens again. Samuel wakes up, because he hears his name being called. "Samuel!" He runs into Eli's room: "Here I am, for you called me." "I didn't call; go back to bed." And then, it happens a third time. This time, Eli realizes what is happening. God is trying to call Samuel. Someone IS calling Samuel's name. **GOD** is trying to get Samuel's attention. This time, Eli gives Samuel this advice. "Go back to your room, Samuel, and lie down. And if God calls again, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

And even though God had already tried three times to get Samuel's attention, with no result, God tried again. You see, God does not give up on us. God does not have a "three strikes and you're out" policy. God is faithful and persistent. So God speaks again to Samuel, and this time, Samuel knows that it is God speaking. Samuel pays attention

and responds. “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” And Samuel goes on to become the most important religious leader of his time.

And it was a time that needed leadership. The very first verse of our reading for today says that “the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” What does that mean? It means that people weren’t listening for God, they weren’t paying attention to what God was saying. They weren’t cultivating their imaginations, dreaming about how they can make the world a better place. They needed leaders, and leaders weren’t going to come from Eli’s family. The book of Samuel calls Eli’s sons “scoundrels” (did you know that word was in the Bible?). They had no regard for God or for the work of the temple. Samuel, on the other hand, was becoming mature in every way. The time spent in the temple was good for him. Here’s how he is described as a young man: “Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in nature and in favor with the Lord and with the people.” Much the way Jesus is described in the gospel of Luke.

It was a time that needed leadership. What time hasn’t? Our time needs leadership, as has every single era in history. We recognize leaders by the way they carry themselves, the way they speak, the accomplishments they achieve, but leadership begins inwardly. The best leaders know who they are. They have taken the time to listen to their own lives, to know their own strengths and weaknesses, and to determine what it is that God is calling them to do.

The message from our reading for today, and my message to all of us, including the youth who are heading to the mission field next week, is simple. It is simply this: God is calling each of us to some kind of leadership. We are all called to be leaders, because

other people are always watching us. We are all called to lead by example, for our words and our actions to be one.

Several weeks ago Nate came into my office and asked if I would help him prepare the devotions for the mission trip. He had a vision for this trip. “You know, we’re going to be in the north woods, we’re going to be spending some time in a national park. It’s the kind of place that inspires people. I’d like us to encourage everyone on the trip this year to find some time for quiet and reflection, even though it’s a really busy week.” And so we thought together about stories in scripture where people hear the voice of God speaking to them.

It doesn’t usually happen for us the way it happened to Samuel, of course. That’s what makes it difficult. If God doesn’t speak directly, how do you know what God is saying to you? How do you know what kind of leadership God is calling you to?

Sometimes we need another person to help us hear. Samuel needed Eli, someone wiser, more experienced, to help him realize that it was God who was speaking. Sometimes we need to find a trusted friend we can talk to about how to discern our purpose.

It also helps to pay attention to what you’re good at and what brings you joy. The word “vocation” comes from the Latin word ‘vocare’ which means to call, to summon, to invite somebody into something that they cannot refuse. Sometimes your job and your vocation are the same thing, but not always. Sometimes there is a job that pays the bills, and then there is a calling, a way to lead others in your family, in your volunteer work, as a mission trip chaperone, and in countless other ways. Your vocation helps define who you are.

So, finding your vocation and listening to your calling are literally the very same thing. My favorite quote about vocation and calling is this one by Frederick Buechner: - "Your vocation in life is where your greatest joy meets the world's greatest need."

Learning who we are, who God has created us to be, discovering our purpose - these are lifelong pursuits, and they require, for most of us, deep listening. Undistracted thinking. Observing our lives without judgment. Paying attention to what we're good at, and then discerning where those gifts are most needed in the world.

The UCC had an ad campaign a few years ago called "God is still speaking." We believe that God did not stop speaking when the Bible was put into final form, but that God continues to reveal dreams and visions to us, encouraging us to use our gifts and our imaginations to fulfill ourselves and to address the problems we see around us. God is speaking, but we won't hear unless we intentionally listen, and help each other listen.

There's a tradition on this mission trip called "HappyGrams" - there will be an envelope for each student and adult on the mission trip and over the course of the week all of the participants will write notes and put them in each person's envelope. The notes are fun and positive, some are thank-you's and they're a way for one person to say to another, "This is what I see in you. This is how I think God is at work in your life." It may be a way for some of you to hear God's call, to sense your vocation.

As we sit here today, two young women graduates of our mission trip experience are embarking on summer-long mission trips of their own. Emily Young, a student at Ohio State, is on the southern route of Bike & Build. Hannah Nicholas, a student at the University of Dayton, is leading a hurricane clean-up effort in Houston. Both of them, spending their summers in the heat, because they felt a nudge from God...because these trips nur-

tured in them a strong desire to do more. They are following their calling, discovering their life's vocation.

What if one of the purposes of the church is for this to be a safe place for people to experiment with and discover their baptismal vocation - the ministry into which we are all called as children of God? We provide so many ways of serving, and you can try them out until you see what fits, what seems to bring you joy and at the same time fulfill a need. It might be teaching Sunday School or rocking babies in the nursery or helping at Vacation Bible School. It might be watering the Secret Garden or weeding the memorial garden or volunteering at the Thrift Shop. It might be mentoring an 8th grader during Confirmation next year or serving on one of our official teams or singing in the choir, playing with the band, or working as an A/V volunteer. Maybe God is nudging you to try a new ministry, something we haven't yet thought of.

Here's what I believe. God has created each one of us in God's own image, with a unique set of gifts and talents, and we each have something to contribute to this body of Christ. No one was left out, no one was forgotten. Each of us has been called. And we will only live up to our potential as a church when each of us finds that niche, that way of service. It's true for the person who only has a few extra minutes per month and it's true of the person who has hours to give per week. It's true of the 9th grader embarking on her first mission trip and it's true of the 90-year-old who has been worshipping here for decades.