

*God who calls us, help us to hear your word, to hear your voice, and to respond with all our hearts. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Sometimes when I'm preparing a sermon, I go back to see if I had anything good to say on these same texts 3 years or 6 years ago – the last time they showed up in the lectionary. This past week I looked back at my old sermons for the second Sunday after Epiphany, and I was shocked. Apparently I have never preached on the call of Samuel before.

Except, I know that I have.

I have preached on this call story more times than I can count.

It just wasn't in a traditional sermon format that I could file away for future us.

Along with the stories of Jesus calling fishermen to be disciples and the appearance of the Lord to Isaiah in the Temple, this is one of the most popular and effective stories to use at church camp and in youth ministry, and even among seminary students, discerning their call to serve the church.

God calls us.

God calls people to certain tasks, in order to further the kingdom of God among us. Throughout the countless years of God's relationship with humanity, God has always called prophets and disciples to carry sacred messages to the world.

A call narrative is a specific type of Bible story. It describes God, or God's messenger, speaking directly to a person about a job they are to do. That job can be as concrete as delivering a message like the one Samuel receives, or as abstract as "follow me," which is all that most of Jesus' disciples hear.

Generally the person being called objects somehow to the calling.

Really, God? I'm not good enough – so say Moses and Gideon and Jeremiah.

Really, God? What you ask is impossible – so say Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah, and Mary.

God often picks the least likely person for the job. David was the youngest son, yet God chose *him* to be king. Paul had spent his life persecuting Christians, yet God called *him* to share the Gospel with the world. Samuel was only a child, who didn't even recognize the voice of God at first.

Call stories can be inspiring.

Hearing them is necessary for all of us normal people.

Most of us want to make the world into a better place, but we don't know how, and too often we think we can't make a significant difference.

So we turn to the examples of Isaiah, Moses, Mary, Zechariah, Sarah... and Samuel. We learn how God's people have responded in the past, in order to help us respond in our own lives, today.

After a week at church camp, I would ask campers, what is God calling you to do? Now that you've had an up close and personal experience with God these past several days, how are you going to bring that experience back home? How is your renewed relationship with God going to change your daily life?

In youth ministry, the call of Samuel offers a great example of how even young people can receive direct communication from God. Children, teens, and young adults are just as likely to be messengers of God as anyone else.

So young people – share your message with courage! And not-so-young people, listen and respect *whoever* carries God's message, regardless of whether they fit your stereotype of a voice of authority or not.

Throughout the ordination process, candidates are asked about their call.

Are you called to be a pastor in this church? If so, then how will you live out your calling?

If not, then what *is* your particular call to live faithfully among God's people?

And let's consider the particular call of Samuel.

He was just a child, and his mother had given him to the Temple to be raised as a servant of God. His service was her thank-offering for God finally granting her a child after years of being unable to conceive.

Though it was Samuel's job to serve God in the Temple, so far he had only learned to do that in a limited way. He could care for the Ark of the Covenant and the lamp of God, but he didn't know how to recognize or respond to the actual voice of God.

Wow. Isn't Samuel like many of us? We know how to go through the actions of worship – perhaps we can even assemble the monthly newsletter, or change out the paraments for the correct season in the church year – but when God speaks *directly* to us, we find it hard to believe and don't know how to respond.

Don't get me wrong – acts of service are good and necessary for the ministry of this community. But sometimes we become so focused on those things, that we miss the movement of the Spirit among us.

Samuel missed that movement at first. But eventually he learned how to hear the voice of God.

The call stories in Scripture challenge *us* to be better listeners.

At first, Samuel didn't recognize God's voice. But he asked Eli about it – Eli, his teacher and mentor, his spiritual guide – and Eli was able to realize that God was the one speaking to the boy.

Can you imagine how Eli might have felt?

This was a time when visions from God were uncommon. Eli had spent his life serving God in the Temple. His sons were grown, his vision was failing, and he knew that his days were numbered. How much would he have *loved* to hear a message from God in his old age?

But he is not the one to hear God's voice. Instead, Eli is left to instruct his apprentice about what to do when the voice of God comes to you. And when this first interaction between God and Samuel is complete, Eli's family line is left under judgment.

The call of Samuel is an example of how to respond when God surprises you by showing up in person. It is also an example of what to do when you feel God nudging you to something that may not be particularly appealing.

Do it anyway.

Samuel was probably scared. He was experiencing something that no one in his time had ever experienced.

Samuel gets to speak with God directly. And it's *not* good news. Samuel is given a message for his teacher, that the house of Eli will be punished for their disobedience.

The disobedience wasn't Eli's, exactly. His sons were serving as priests, and they were breaking religious laws, blatantly and continually. Eli wasn't able to stop them. So it seems that he mostly ignored them.

And in response, God cursed the family of Eli. His sons were going to die – this was mentioned right before the reading for today – and the sins of those priests, his sons, would never be forgiven.

Can you imagine delivering a message like that to your mentor?

Samuel is an amazing prophet. He will become the one to find and anoint the first two kings of Israel, following the guidance of God. But his ministry starts out a little rough. He doesn't recognize God's voice at first, and once he does, he's given a painful message to deliver.

That's the problem, you see.

When we answer the call of God, we don't always know what we'll be getting in to. We sometimes end up doing things we really don't want to do. But we also sometimes end up doing things that are wonderful and amazing!

It's a risk.

Listening to God's voice, participating in our own call narrative – it is an incredible risk for us to take.

When we say yes to God's call, we don't know what to expect. But God will be with us even when we're called to something we don't want to do.

If we feel ill-equipped, like Moses or Jeremiah, or if we're asked to do the impossible, like Sarah or Mary, God will be with us and give us what we need to get God's work done.

Perhaps it helps to look at the circumstances under which these call narratives tended to happen in the Bible. That might give us an idea of what we can expect if God speaks directly to us.

God's voice breaks through when there are corrupt leaders, poisoning those who are trying to follow God. That's what was going on when Samuel was called. We hear about it in the poor example of Eli's sons.

But also, at that time, the people were asking for a change in governance. They had been living under judges for many years, but they wanted a king like all of the neighboring countries had. So, eventually, God would also use Samuel to institute a new form of government for the people of God.

God speaks to prophets when there is some kind of change to be made. The prophets are often asked to call their leaders to task.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God's prophets bring warnings of punishment and messages of repentance. The people have fallen away from following God's law, and so God is going to punish them.

God also calls prophets when the people are already being punished somehow for the sins of those who came before.

In those cases, God gives the prophets a message of comfort. Even when life is terrible, you are still remembered and loved by God. And things *will* get better.

When we are listening for God's voice, we might consider how God is speaking to *us*. Is it time to press for cultural change? Is God leading us toward a new social structure, as has happened before?

Or are God's people already suffering under oppression, and is our job to simply preach the love of God to those who are already treated as worthless outcasts by the society at large?

Samuel gives us the example.

Go. Serve. Listen.

And if you hear God's voice, simply respond: speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

When you – when we – remain open to God's action in our lives, we will probably be surprised by it. Just like Eli and Samuel were surprised.

When we continue to listen for God's voice among the cacophony of other voices that seek to direct us, we may find ourselves receiving messages that we did not expect.

But our job is to deliver those messages.

God has a calling for each one of us.

Even in days like these, when the word of the Lord may be rare and visions may not be widespread, God *does* still speak to us.

So we listen. And when we hear, our job is to respond. Even if we don't like it.

God may give us a message that challenges us, or our loved ones. But if that's the message we get, then that's the message we are to deliver.

Being a disciple – being a prophet – it's not always easy work.

But it's good work. It's valuable work. And it's the work to which God calls us.

So how will you answer?

Please pray with me.

God, teach us to hear your voice, and to respond enthusiastically to your call. In

Jesus' name,

Amen.