

Can You Hear Me Now?

“Samuel’s Call”

[1 Samuel 3:1-9](#)

This is the second Sunday of our sermon series titled “Can You Hear Me, Now?” Like the guy who tests the wireless reception quality in the famous Verizon Wireless commercials we still remember from several years ago, God calls God’s people, asking us, “Can you hear me now?” This divine call can come to us, at anyplace and anytime, as revealed in the call stories of our ancestors of faith.

For some of them, like Abraham and Sarah whom we reflected on last Sunday, and Moses whom we will hear about next Sunday, God’s call came in the second half or last third of their lives. For others, like Samuel, king David, prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, Daniel, Mary, and Timothy, their respective calls came to them when they were still quite youthful. Today, we have the story of God calling young Samuel and commissioning him as the new leader of the Israelites.

The historical context of Samuel’s call story is as follows: It was near the end of the period of the Judges. While the term Judges suggests mediators in a legal setting, Judges referred to individuals who served more than just judicial functions. They were tribal leaders whom God raised whenever the Israelites faced existential threats from outside forces. Through God’s grace, these Judges were able to liberate and save Israel from foreign occupation.

By then, the Israelites had settled down in Canaan. After leaving Egypt and wandering around the desert for 40 years, they went into the promised land having experienced God’s wondrous deliverance and provision. They also carried with them great expectations for living as God’s people in this new place. They built altars and temples for God, vowing to serve God, obey God’s laws, and live as God’s people.

But, as they became increasingly settled in the new land, their commitment to God began to fade. While the priests still maintained the temples and performed religious ceremonies, many Israelites, preoccupied with their own interests, slowly abandoned their faith in Yahweh, the Great I Am.

Eventually, most people forgot about their God who had delivered them from captivity. They were too busy enjoying life in the land of milk and honey. Some elders remembered the troubled times of exile and wandering through the wilderness, but this was not the case with the new generation. Even the priests’ own children did not know God. For the faith of the priesthood was also eroded and corrupted. The ending of the book of Judges sums it up by saying, “Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” There was no word, no vision from God. It was in this time of spiritual darkness that Samuel was born.

According to Samuel’s birth story, which is found in the first chapter of 1 Samuel, he was a miracle baby! His mother, Hannah, was barren, so she went to the temple and cried out to God for a child. She promised

God that if she could have a son, she would dedicate him to God's service. When her prayers were answered, she named her child Samuel, which means "God has heard."

After Samuel had been weaned, Hannah fulfilled her promise to God by taking him to the priest Eli and placing him under his supervision. Thus, from a very young age, Samuel grew up in the Temple, living there and helping the priest carry out his religious duties.

One night, probably sometime before dawn, Samuel hears someone calling his name. "Samuel! Samuel!" Thinking it was Eli, Samuel gets up and runs over to the priest -- something he must have had to do more frequently as Eli's "eyesight had begun to grow dim." But, to his surprise, Samuel finds out that Eli had not called for him. He goes and lies back down only for the same thing to happen. Again, he attends to Eli, who tells him, no, it was not he who called.

It is when this happens for a third time that Eli catches on. He tells Samuel to give that famous line: "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening." Ever obedient, Samuel does as he is instructed by Eli, and finally he is able to answer the One who has called him.

I always find this story so fascinating.

Samuel had grown up in the temple, literally, since he was a little baby. And, he slept in the room where the ark of God was. The ark of God, otherwise known as the ark of the covenant, was considered to be the most holy place because it was the place where the power of God was most present. It was so powerful that people could be killed even by touching it.

And, Samuel had been right there next to the presence of God day and night for many years. Yet, the scripture says, Samuel did not even know God. He was so unfamiliar with God that when God spoke to him, he mistook the voice as Eli's.

Growing up in the church, belonging to the church, or being in church all the time does not automatically make us recognize the voice of God when God calls us. Actually, for many, the Church has been a stumbling block to hearing God's voice and recognizing God's call for them.

Not too long ago, it was the Church who told certain believers it could not be the voice of God calling them because God only called men to ministry. Somehow, the Church was blind to the testimony In the gospel of John, where we hear of the Samaritan woman who brought her neighbors, actually her whole village, to Jesus. Somehow, the Church was blind to the fact that it was Mary Magdalene to whom Jesus first appeared after His resurrection; that it was a woman who was called to bring the good news of His resurrection to His disciples. Despite the biblical evidence of women being called to testify by and on behalf of Jesus Christ, many generations of church leaders, starting with the apostle Paul, tried to mute the voice of women.

Thank God that this is no longer the story in most mainline denominational churches. Otherwise, I will not stand before you today. Unfortunately, the Roman Catholic Church and some Protestant churches, including the Southern Baptist Church and the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, still believe that God only calls men.

It is the Church who has told, and continues to tell, certain believers that it could not be the voice of God because they were gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer. LGBTQ persons were told that God calls only heterosexual people to do God's work. Sadly, this is the official stance of our denomination.

After many decades of struggle over the issue of homosexuality, last year, the General Conference approved a Commission on a Way Forward to conduct a complete examination and possible revision of every paragraph in the Book of Discipline concerning the issue of human sexuality and also to explore options that might help to maintain and strengthen the unity of the Church. Last week, the Council of Bishops received an interim report from the Commission, and a final report will come out next year in preparation for the Special Session of the General Conference in 2019. I invite you to join me in praying for the work of the Commission and the Council of Bishops as they continue to discern God's plan for the future of our denomination.

And, it is the Church who too often tells seekers that it couldn't be the voice of God because they have more questions than answers when it concerns God because God does not call those who still have lingering doubts about their faith. Actually, this was the story of my son, Joe.

When Joe heard in his heart the voice of God calling him into ordained ministry, he brushed it off because he could not imagine himself being able to fit into the dominant church culture as he had more questions than answers. In his mind, questions were not allowed in Church. He thought that he had to accept everything preached in the pulpit and taught in Bible study.

I realized that he got this kind of idea from the churches he attended during his college and graduate school days. These were more conservative, non-denominational settings.

His journey back to faith actually occurred in a United Methodist Church, a new church plant where he witnessed a community of believers in Jesus Christ who could bring their authentic selves, doubts and all; and where he encountered pastors who did not claim to have all the right answers and instead sought to ask honest questions. And, in this predominantly LGBTQ community led by a female lesbian pastor, Joe began to hear God's voice calling him into ministry. I am proud to tell you that he is now in his final year at a Methodist seminary. I pray that God will use him in a mighty way to renew our Church.

Samuel grew up in the Temple, yet he did not know God. When God spoke to him, he did not recognize God's voice. He needed Eli's help to understand what was happening and to properly respond to God's call.

The priest was old and weak. His sight, both physical and spiritual, was failing. He had not heard God's word in ages. For "The word of the LORD was rare in those days." And yet, God was not done with Eli. It took a while for Eli to realize what was truly happening to Samuel, but he was able to answer Samuel's questions and guide him in the right direction. Like Eli, who gave young Samuel the tools he would need to lead and guide God's people, the Church, despite our limitations, also has a role to play.

The God who called Samuel and raised him as a new leader for the Israelites continues to call new leaders to liberate and save us from the dangers of our time. We must have the humility to recognize that God's ways are not our ways. Samuel certainly did not seem to be qualified to be a leader of God's people -- He did not hear God when God spoke. He missed his call three times! He did not even know God! Yet, this was the one God chose. And, right there to guide him towards his call was Eli, who in his weak physical and spiritual condition surely could not have imagined being of any great service to God. Yet, he was found willing to pass on what he knew.

Brothers and Sisters, we need more Elis in our Church. We need those who are willing to pass on to our children and youth the stories of the Bible, our faith tradition, our history, our culture, our mission and vision. We need elders who are willing to help the younger generation listen for the voice of God, helping them to understand what God is saying. You may think you are too old, or too weak to be of use to God. If you are willing, you will discover that you, like Eli, can help the Samuels in our midst to hear God's voice for themselves. Take your ministry seriously. It is a very important one. It is a vital ministry of our church.

And, we also need more Samuels in our Church. We need those who are courageous to admit that you don't always know how to recognize God's voice, that maybe, you don't even know God. Hear the good news: You are who God calls to lead God's people in these troubling times! And the Elis of our Church will be here, willing to help you encounter the presence of God.

The truth is that God is calling all of us to participate in God's ministry. Hearing the voice of God is important. I hope you will be able to "Yes, I can!" whenever God asks you, "Can you hear me now?" But, what's more important is how we respond to the call that we hear. May we be found responding to God's call as Samuel did: "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

Thanks be to God! Amen.