

“Call and Response”

1 Samuel 3: 1 – 10 (11-20)

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The call of Samuel is one of the favorite stories in Hebrew Scriptures. Samuel, the first born of Hannah. Remember Hannah’s story? She could not bear children and because of that was worn down by ridicule because bearing children pretty much determined the wealth of a woman in those days. So, she goes to the temple to pray, her prayers are so intense with her lips moving and her body rocking that when the temple priest, Eli, sees her, he thinks she’s drunk. But Hannah defends herself, “I’m not drunk, I’m just praying with all of my being that I bear a son!” She returns home and nine months or so later, Samuel is born, this miracle within the other miracle that is the birth of any child. Hannah is so overcome with joy and awe that as soon as the baby is weaned, she keeps the promise that she made while praying that day in the temple – that she would ‘give the child to God’. She turns him over to the temple to be raised there as a temple assistant.

Fast forward just a few years to the infant Samuel grown into a boy and assistant of the priest Eli. And here is where our scripture for today begins. In the middle of the night, boy Samuel hears his name, “Samuel, Samuel” and goes running into Priest Eli’s room, assuming, of course, that Eli was calling. But he was met with Eli mumbling, “Go back to bed! You’re dreaming! Samuel settles into sleep again and the same thing happens. “Samuel, Samuel!” He runs again into Eli’s room. (Kids love to act out this story in Sunday School!) Eli yells this time, “Stop bothering me! Go back to bed! You’re hearing things!” Well, as the saying goes, the third time’s a charm, Eli realizes what we as the readers/listeners know all along, that this is God speaking! And so, he advises Samuel to stay put and see what the Lord wants.

So, the Lord came and stood there and said once again, “Samuel, Samuel” and this time, THIS time, Samuel didn’t run but said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

What a wonderful Epiphany story, a story of how God was made manifest in an old man’s and a young boy’s life, that “Ah Ha!” moment when they finally get what was going on! It took them both a number of times but that’s GOOD NEWS for US, isn’t it? That if we can’t hear or choose not to hear or don’t recognize God’s nudge then God won’t just give up on us the first time or even the second time but knows each of us by name and keeps calling us! Or maybe that’s NOT

such good news because, well, sometimes we have to admit that we'd rather just say, "God will you go away?" And the answer is "No!")

The story of Samuel's call is a favorite, a story about kid empowerment, about how God calls each of us when we least expect it, about how generations young (Samuel) and old (Eli) come together to discern how God is acting in their lives. And then comes the next part...those verses in parentheses which means, well, they aren't the main part of the text for this week so it's OK to ignore them if you want. Just stop after verse 10 and maybe even add "They lived happily ever after" at the end.

But our story continues...with those words in parentheses...Samuel says, "Speak, for your servant is listening". And the Lord speaks:

Read verses 11 – 20

There were injustices happening in the house of Eli. If we had started just a few chapters back, we would have learned that Eli's sons were skimming too much off of what was supposed to be sacrificed to the temple, and they were sleeping with the women who sat outside the temple gates. Their father, Eli, had heard gossip of this and yet chose to turn his back in denial. And God said, "Enough!" And it was Samuel who was chosen to deliver God's 'enough' message.

'Samuel, Samuel, I am calling you because all is not right in the world, there are injustices right in your own backyard, the injustice of greed and using people because some think that others just don't matter (remember, we're talking about many, many years ago, right?). Samuel, I'm calling YOU to speak to those injustices, to tell the one in charge, to speak truth to power, to lay it all out for your mentor Eli that this has got to stop, that this isn't right and not just his sons but his house – HE HIMSELF – is to blame because he turned his back and chose not to do anything about it.

It's such a feel-good story if we could just stop at verse 10.

"Here I am, God!" I'm ready to listen! I'm ready to be your follower!" But was he really? And...are...we...really?

Samuel did listen, and he did respond as asked by God. How hard that must have been to come out with the harsh truth to his friend, to stand on the side of right even though it might make him an enemy, might rock the boat, to name what had

been going on as a part of the temple, the privileged culture he lived in at the time. And how hard it must have been for Eli to listen, to shake himself from denial, to finally see what was going on and maybe even how he profited from it?

Samuel listened and heard God say that God was about to do a new thing – that this old, corrupt, ‘skim the profits from the poor, use people without a care because they don’t count’ way of being was going to be a thing of the past...God was claiming another way of being!

Our story began with a description of the time. “The Lord’s word was rare at that time, and visions weren’t widely known.” Words that supposedly name a specific time in history but most likely describes times throughout history.

The time was 1955. The place: Montgomery, AL. The injustice is forced segregation on city buses. Local pastors are gathered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church – strategizing. Rosa Parks has recently been arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white person. Her trial will be coming soon. A lot of ideas go back and forth, but nothing clear emerges. Until – a young pastor of the church, new to town, raises his hand. The boycott has a leader.

Perhaps the young man heard a whispering of his name, “Martin, Martin.” Maybe the call had to be two or three times, we don’t know. But then Martin Luther King, Jr. answered, rose up to speak against injustices, to speak truth to power.

Dr. King was a man of faith whose faith called him to stand against the injustices of his time.

Hear these words of Dr. King, words to the church: “Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually dying religion waiting burial.”

And as I quote Dr. King, front and center in my mind is another quote that I read just a couple of days ago: “Don’t quote King on Sunday or Monday if you choose to be silent about the President’s comments of this past week.”

Where do we find ourselves? Like Eli, turning our backs, ignoring the demeaning words that, coming from such high leadership, devalue those children of God in those (expletive) places? Demeaning words that denounce our nation’s principle of giving refuge to those facing persecution, hardship?

I am very proud of our General Minister and President, Rev. Dr. Terri Hoard Owens, who chose instead to follow in the footsteps of Samuel and hear God's call to speak truth to power. I feel called to share her letter with you now:

*As a follower of Jesus Christ, as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I must speak to repudiate the comments from the President of the US on January 11, 2018. As Christians, we believe that all humans are made in the image of God and therefore worth of dignity and respect. We are called to love, and Jesus tells us that we will be known as his disciples if we have love for one another. (John 13:35). There are certain roads that love cannot take. Love cannot take the road of discrimination; love cannot take the road of hate; love cannot take the road of oppression; love cannot take the road of racism; love cannot take the road of gender bias; love cannot take the road of homophobia. There is no justification for these hateful and racist comments. None. As the nation prepares to honor the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I remind all those who claim to be followers of Christ of Dr. King's admonition to speak up against injustice, to work for human dignity, for peace, and for equal justice for all. Dr. King was most disappointed that those who called themselves Christians were telling him to wait until a more judicious time for action. Today it is clear that we still cannot wait. I call upon those who believe in the dignity of all persons to not only speak, but work together to rid our nation of systemic injustice, to register to vote, and hold those who are not in solidarity with basic human dignity and justice to account. Acts of charity and songs of unity will not be enough to dismantle the structural injustice that exists in our society. We cannot allow such hatred to stand unchallenged, and we cannot be silent or inactive in the face of words and actions that violate the commandment of Jesus to love all whom God has created.*

I pray that every day, but especially on this weekend, we hear God calling our name as well; calling us to speak out against injustices, speak truth to power. I pray that Rev. Owens words, that "as a follower of Jesus Christ, she must speak out", that we too as followers of the one from Nazareth rise to speak out as well whenever we hear words that demean or disgrace any of God's children. That one from Nazareth who we follow. Can anything good come from Nazareth? If I were preaching from the gospel today, that would have been our text. Philip meets Jesus who says to him, "Come and follow me." On the way, Philip sees Nathanael and says to Nathanael, 'you want to follow with us, this is the new Moses'. To which Nathanael asks, "Him? That Nazarene? Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" That backward, hole in the wall place, that 'God forsaken' place that "expletive" of a place?

And we know the answer. The answer is 'yes'. For with God, all things are possible, and all people are loved. That is the good news. Amen