

Answering God's Call

^{CEB} **1 Samuel 3:1-11** Now the boy Samuel was serving the LORD under Eli. The LORD's word was rare at that time, and visions weren't widely known. ² One day Eli, whose eyes had grown so weak he was unable to see, was lying down in his room. ³ God's lamp hadn't gone out yet, and Samuel was lying down in the LORD's temple, where God's chest was. ⁴ The LORD called to Samuel. "I'm here," he said. ⁵ Samuel hurried to Eli and said, "I'm here. You called me?" "I didn't call you," Eli replied. "Go lie down." So he did. ⁶ Again the LORD called Samuel, so Samuel got up, went to Eli, and said, "I'm here. You called me?" "I didn't call, my son," Eli replied. "Go and lie down." (⁷ Now Samuel didn't yet know the LORD, and the LORD's word hadn't yet been revealed to him.) ⁸ A third time the LORD called Samuel. He got up, went to Eli, and said, "I'm here. You called me?" Then Eli realized that it was the LORD who was calling the boy. ⁹ So Eli said to Samuel, "Go and lie down. If he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD. Your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down where he'd been. ¹⁰ Then the LORD came and stood there, calling just as before, "Samuel, Samuel!" Samuel said, "Speak. Your servant is listening." ¹¹ The LORD said to Samuel, "I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of all who hear it tingle!

John 1:43-51 CEB ⁴³ The next day Jesus wanted to go into Galilee, and he found Philip. Jesus said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴ Philip was from Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and the Prophets: Jesus, Joseph's son, from Nazareth." ⁴⁶ Nathanael responded, "Can anything from Nazareth be good?" Philip said, "Come and see." ⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said about him, "Here is a genuine Israelite in whom there is no deceit." ⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered, "Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree." ⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are God's Son. You are the king of Israel." ⁵⁰ Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these! ⁵¹ I assure you that you will see heaven open and God's angels going up to heaven and down to earth on the Human One."

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What in the world is a child doing in the holy tabernacle of God, sleeping near the most holy object of Israel, the Ark of the Covenant? This child, Samuel, is no ordinary child. Let's back up a little bit. His mother, Hannah, had been unable to have children. That's a common story in the Old Testament. All three of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had wives who were unable to become pregnant. The same was true for the mother of Samson. In each instance, divine intervention made children possible. And sometime just before 1000 BC, perhaps around 1050 BC, a woman named Hannah, who was desperate to bear children for her husband, went to the Tabernacle and fervently prayed that God might give her a son. If she were to have a son, she would dedicate him to the service of the Lord. Hannah had a boy and named him Samuel. When he was still very young, she took him to the tabernacle at Shiloh and left him in the care of Eli, the priest.

Eli seems to have been a decent enough man, but he failed to discipline and control his sons. They took the best parts of the sacrifices brought to Shiloh. They would seduce or rape women near the entrance of the tabernacle. The scriptures sum up their attitude and behavior, saying, "They knew not the Lord." And Eli failed to punish and discipline them for their abominable behavior.

When we come to today's text, some years have passed. Samuel has grown but is not yet an adult. Eli has aged and is partially blind. The nation of Israel is in a similar condition, having lost sight of God. Long gone were the days of manna on the ground for the taking. There were no cloudy pillars going ahead of the people – and none were

expected or anticipated. Leaders like Moses and Joshua were just a memory. It's a time when the Lord's word is rare and visions are infrequent.

Even though these were dark times, the text says, "God's lamp hadn't gone out yet." That phrase has several meanings. One: the lamp in the tabernacle was lit, so it was before dawn. Two: centuries later, after the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, readers of that time saw it as a reminder that the story of Samuel took place in earlier times. Three: it also means that God was still present in the land, even though many did not sense that presence. The lamp was a sign of God's presence in the tabernacle – and, therefore, with God's people. Even today, millennia later, we use candles to remind us of the presence of God.

Some of us may have read the story of God's call to Samuel in a Bible story book when we were children. Three times Samuel heard a voice calling and three times he thought it must be Eli calling him. But the third time Eli understood and told Samuel that the voice must be from God. "If you hear the voice again, reply, "Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening." It took the observation of a third party to make God's call clear to Samuel. Samuel was young when he heard God's call. What a contrast with the foolishness and disobedience of Eli's older sons!

Like Samuel, often we are sleeping. We don't sense the presence of God around us. We're too distracted, too busy, too caught up in media of all sorts to be able to listen for, or contemplate God's word. No matter what our age or generation, we tend to fill our time with texting, tweeting, email, Facebook, television, reading books, and listening to the radio or our iPod. There isn't much silence in our lives. We leave little time to think, to contemplate, to leave our minds open to the whisper of inspiration. Silence makes us uncomfortable. I suspect that some of us tried silence sometime and when God didn't speak in five minutes or fifteen minutes, we gave up and presumed that there was no divine message for us. "Speak now, Lord, or I'll turn the TV back on." And, sometimes someone else point to the call that we don't recognize.

If we don't explore the verses that follow, we can settle for a nice little call story involving a nice boy and a tired old priest. But if we continue on, we have a powerful story about the courage it takes to listen and speak God's word. God said that he was going to do something new that would make everybody's ears tingle. It's a colorful expression. And what God did would make people's ears perk up and pay attention. The position of priest was an inherited position. But because of the gross misbehavior of Eli's sons, the family line would die with them and none of Eli's family would become priest. This was a radical departure from the way that was traditional and proper.

The next morning, Eli made Samuel tell him all that the Lord had revealed to him. The very first action of his call was difficult. Samuel must bear the news of God's judgment to his mentor. Overnight, Eli the mentor becomes the dependent, and Samuel the student becomes the teacher. And Eli accepted God's judgment as just.

We like to think of God as unchangeable, but God is often doing a new thing. God says so plainly in Isaiah 43:19. "Look! I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it?" God did a new thing in calling Abraham to go to Canaan. God did a new thing with Joseph, transforming him from slave to second only to Pharaoh. God did a new thing by cutting off Eli's family and raising up someone who was not blood kin to take his place. How often do we resist the thought that God might be doing a new thing? All through the centuries, God has challenged us to change, to step out of our habits and traditions, and do a new thing. Kicking and screaming, we have nonetheless abolished

slavery, come to see women as equals, and fought racial bigotry. There are new challenges today as we struggle with ecumenical and gender issues. God has and is always challenging us to be part of change.

Now, let's take a look at another call story, today's passage from John's gospel. When I was younger, I had the distinct impression that Jesus walked around, spotted who he wanted to be his twelve apostles, said, "Come, follow me," and they immediately jumped up and left everything behind to follow Jesus. That picture of instantaneous dedication left me feeling guilty about my questions and my doubts. John tells a more nuanced account.

Leading up to this passage, we are told that on the previous day, Jesus was standing with two of John the Baptist's disciples. Seeing them, John the Baptist said, "Look! The Lamb of God!" Those two disciples of John spent the rest of the day hanging out with Jesus. One of them was Andrew, who went and found his brother Simon. Telling his brother that they had found the Messiah, he took his brother Simon to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are John's son Simon. I will call you Peter."

In today's text, it's the next day and Jesus saw Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Just as Andrew had gone and found Peter, Philip went and found Nathanael. He told him that he had found the expected Messiah and that he was from Nazareth. Nathanael seems incredulous, asking if anything good can come from Nazareth. Philip replies, "Come and see." When Nathanael meets Jesus, he's impressed that Jesus already seems to know about him, saying, "Here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." Nathanael declares that Jesus is God's Son and King of Israel.

Of the four men, only Philip appears to have been called with the command, "Follow me." The other three – Andrew, Peter, and Nathanael – are quickly drawn to follow Jesus because they see in him something that inspires them and they want to know more.

So what does it mean to be called? We tend to think that being called by God is something dramatic. The child Samuel heard God speaking to him in clear words. Philip was invited directly by Jesus – "Come. Follow me." Perhaps we think of Saul on the road to Damascus, blinded by a bright light and hearing the voice of Jesus. And so if we haven't had some ecstatic experience, if we haven't heard God speaking to us in plain English, then we think we don't have a call.

Don't overlook that Peter and Nathanael were invited to check out Jesus by someone else. Their initial call came from a relative or a friend. And no one called Andrew. He heard John the Baptist speak of Jesus as the Lamb of God and he decided to investigate this Jesus for himself. Your call, and we are all called by God, may come in the form of an idea that occurs to you. It may come in the form of curiosity to try something new. Your call may be pointed out by someone else, even someone as imperfect as Eli. God's call to us will not usually come as clearly and as urgently as it did to the disciples and prophets in scripture. Instead, it often comes to us through the stories of scripture. The good news here is that God has cared for his people and has made faith possible for us by providing prophets and apostles. Their example and their teaching still speaks to us in scripture.

We are all called to be compassionate, loving, and peaceful, to offer hospitality, to be ambassadors for Christ, and many other things. Basically, as Rachel Naomi Ramen wrote, "We are here to grow in wisdom and to learn to love better."ⁱ But we each have varying levels of each of these gifts. For some, hospitality is expressed in cooking, or in sitting and listening, or in a welcoming smile, handshake, or hug. No matter what our individual gifts

may be, we are all called to grow in faith, to continue on the journey, and that means that we must be open to taking risks, trying new tasks, and learning new ideas. Amen.

Grow in wisdom
Learn to love better.
Answer your call.

ⁱ Rachel Naomi Ramen, *My Grandfather's Blessings* (New York, Riverhead Books, 2000) p 326