

“Called”
I Samuel 3:1-10
Rev. Chris Mereschuk
Final Sermon at Haydenville Congregational Church
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Prayer...

My first big job out of college was at a large local human services agency in the adult mental health division. I started in what is called “direct care” — helping people with appointments, errands, meal prep, general hanging out and keeping people company. I liked it well enough. Somehow after several months I got promoted to be a Site Manager of a program — like an assistant manager. This position came with longer hours and a pager. Just a few months after that, I got promoted again to be a Program Director at a residential program. That position came with even longer hours and a much more active pager.

Like I said, I enjoyed the work well enough. It felt like I was doing something useful with my time, I got to meet some great people, and clearly there was some upward mobility for me. But it wasn't really doing it for me, and I couldn't see myself in the job longterm. It got pretty emotionally draining — lots of “giving” of myself without a whole lot of chances for renewal. And I knew that if I wanted to go any further in that career that I needed to go to grad school. I looked at all the relevant programs and degrees, and nothing felt right. Actually, often when I would consider various degrees, I'd see a grey cloud forming over my mind. And the job itself: again, it was draining; there was a lot of politics and a lot of grumbling and a lot of high expectations and the anchor-like weight of the pager tethering me down. At times, my dissatisfaction and my restlessness was confusing to me, because I was apparently good enough at my job, I liked my coworkers, I liked the clients I worked with — on paper, it seemed like this is what I was supposed to be doing. But something didn't sit right.

It wasn't fitting.
It wasn't fulfilling my purpose.
It wasn't my calling.

Then one day in June 2002 — it was supposed to be my one day off — one day in June 2002, it all came to a head. The pager — that cursed pager — wouldn't stop going off, starting early in the morning. This client needed something urgent, this staff person needed advice, this crisis was brewing, the fire alarm system was malfunctioning and the fire department showed up several times, then this, then that, then this again — my pager was buzzing and chirping non-stop until that final page at around 2 in the morning.

I called the number. It was my supervisor from the main office. My very angry, beyond annoyed, sleep deprived supervisor. Residents and staff had been paging her as well. “Hello. I'm responding to your page.”

“Chris. Come into my office first thing in the morning. FIRST. THING.”
“OK.”

I hung up, and I began to cry. I just broke down. I couldn't handle all that was going on. Was I about to be fired? At the very least, how much was I about to be chewed out and ripped apart? How much could I take?

So, 2 am on that June night — early morning now, I suppose — my brain started turning through my tears. “OK Chris, so what are you going to do?”

I started thinking of everything I like to do, what skills I had, what kinds of things were fun for me, what I was good at, what I was curious about, and then I stopped and listened and a clear voice came through:

“I'm going to go to seminary.”
My tears stopped, and I fell asleep.

Many pastors will tell you that they were called to the ministry.
I prefer to say that I was paged.

When the sun rose, I went to face my boss. I don't remember how that went, but I'm guessing not well.

Then that same day I contacted 2 pastors who were always mentors to me — one was Rev. Dr. Evans Sealand, my childhood pastor who passed away a year ago. I told Mr. Sealand and my other mentor that I was considering going to seminary. Both of them replied the same way: “About time. I've been waiting for this.”

I guess they believed that I was indeed called.

It's a funny thing, this language of “call.” Pastors like to get kind of fancy and lofty about things like call and discernment. In other professions, you might just say something is a “good fit” or that you were “born to do” such and such, or that you put the pieces together, thought hard about them, and figured out what you were supposed to do with your life. I kind of laugh at myself — not at others who say it, but at myself — when I think of being called to something. But I think that's just my continuing discomfort with the idea that God would actively recruit me. Then again, we know God calls all sorts of people, plus God has a fantastic sense of humor.

Despite all that, I know that I'm called. I know that my purpose in life is to somehow, somewhere proclaim the work, witness, welcome, and radical liberating love of Jesus — and to get paid for it. To not answer that call would make me miserable — I know because I've tried not to answer it, I've tried to step away from it.

It's like the Prophet Jeremiah said:

“If I say, “I will not mention God,
or speak any more in God's name,”

then within me there is something like a burning fire
shut up in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.”¹

See, that’s how I know I’m called.

But that call is not the end of the story — at least not for me. For me, the way the call works is uncomfortably like that pager: the call comes in, I respond. Then another call, and another. Sometimes I need a translator, I need some help figuring out just what the call is about. And every time I respond to the call, I need to keep checking to see if I’m responding the way I’m supposed to, the way I need to, maybe the way God needs me to.

Discerning — figuring out — that call can be tricky. If you don’t know what to listen for or if you don’t know what it sounds like, it can be easy to miss a call. Just the same, it can be easy to mistake one voice for another and believe that you are being called. That’s exactly how it was with a young boy named Samuel.

Samuel’s life was predetermined for him by his mother, Hannah. Rather, it was predetermined for him by his mother’s promise to God. Hannah desperately wanted a son, but had not been able to conceive. So she went to the temple of the Lord where Eli was the priest. She prayed to God that she would have a son, and made a vow that — if God would hear her and give her a son — that she would consecrate him to God. Her son would be a Nazirite — one who is separated, devoted to serving God.²

In due time, God heard Hannah and she bore a son, and she named him Samuel — because she had asked this of God, and God heard her.³ And when the child was weaned from Hannah’s breast, she brought him to live at the temple with the priest Eli.⁴

The boy Samuel grew up in the temple as a sort of student-apprentice-adopted-son of Eli’s, learning all that he could about the responsibilities and duties of working in the temple.

Meanwhile, Eli’s biological sons were off causing trouble. Scripture says that they were “scoundrels” who “had no regard for the Lord.”⁵ This angered God, and Eli fell out of God’s favor, and declared that Eli and his sons would be cut off from God’s grace. But as

¹ Jeremiah 20:9

² 1 Samuel 1:6-11 paraphrase

³ 1 Samuel 1:20

⁴ 1 Samuel 1:21-28

⁵ 1 Samuel 2:12

for Samuel, scripture says that he “continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and the people.”⁶

One night while Samuel was sleeping near the Ark of the Covenant, he heard a voice calling out to him: “Samuel! Samuel!”
Being a dutiful temple student, Samuel assumed that it was the priest Eli calling for him, so he awoke and rushed to Eli’s chambers:
“Here I am, for you called for me.”

But it wasn’t Eli calling Samuel: “I did not call; lie down again.”
So Samuel returned to sleep.

Two more times this happened in the exact same way:
The calling out: “Samuel! Samuel!”
Young Samuel rushes to Eli: “Here I am, for you called for me.”
“I did not call, my son; lie down again.”

After the third time this happened, Eli recognized that this was more than just Samuel having some vivid dreams or a bout of restless sleep. There was indeed someone calling Samuel, but it was not Eli. Eli told Samuel that the next time he hears his name called out, don’t get up and go to Eli’s chambers; instead, reply to the call: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

So when that voice called out a fourth time, Samuel knew that it was not the voice of his mentor Eli, but the voice of God, and Samuel responded just as Eli taught him: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” And God spoke to Samuel. Throughout the rest of his life, Samuel listened intently for the Lord and to the Lord and grew to become a prophet and judge over Israel, later anointing the first king, Saul. But if Samuel had not learned to listen for and recognize God’s voice and God’s call, he might have just remained serving Eli in the temple.

It’s understandable that Samuel didn’t recognize the Lord’s voice at first. Scripture says that God was pretty quiet in those days and that these visions and revelations were rare. Samuel was young; he was only a low-level apprentice of sorts in the temple. Though he was under Eli’s care, Samuel was not from a priestly lineage, not someone you’d pick for God to call. But we know how that story always goes.

There are great lessons for us here in Samuel’s story.

Friends, I believe that God has called, is calling, and will call out to each one of us — it’s just that we might not know that, we might not recognize God’s voice, we might mistake another voice for God’s voice, or we might not really be listening. Sometimes you hear a call — it’s clear, it’s loud — but you don’t know where it’s coming from — so you respond to one call, but it’s the wrong number (Hear what I’m saying?).

⁶ 1 Samuel 2:26

And we don't always hear that call all at once. It's not always a flash of light and a loud booming voice out of nowhere. Sometimes it's like a puzzle we piece together or a tapestry we weave thread by thread, intermittent whispers and words we hear that we must string together to form a coherent message.

Reflecting on the gradual recognition or revelation of a call, Rev. Dr. Beth Tanner of New Brunswick Theological Seminary notes that most people she knows “do not describe [their call] a major disruption in their lives. Instead they speak of a quiet, slow awakening — perhaps to a life of service or an injustice that needs to be addressed.”

Even when that call begins to take shape, questions and doubts can remain. As Rev. Dr. Tanner writes, “Like Samuel, [people who have recognized a call] often tell about a period of uncertainty regarding what they are being called to do or be.”⁷

Navigating that uncertainty requires holy and intentional listening. If you want to hear God calling out to you, then you have to actually pause for a minute so that you can listen.

Rev. Dr. Luke Powery of Duke Divinity School writes of “prayerful listening that leads to prophetic proclaiming,” echoing Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s belief that “activism prefaced by prayer can be most effective.”⁸ Powery reminds us that — though he was thought of first as a powerful speaker — Rev. Dr. King was an even more powerful and prayerful listener.

Rev. Dr. Powery recounts the story of a night in January 1965 during the Montgomery Bus Boycott when Rev. Dr. King was deeply disturbed by a threatening phone call. Exhausted yet unable to sleep, near the point of giving up, Rev. Dr. King instead sat down at his kitchen table and prayed. But his prayer was not just his words lifted to God. Instead, he prayed by silencing his own voice, opening his ears and his heart to God’s call to him. And in that moment, King claimed that he “could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, ‘Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.’”⁹

I don't know what Rev. Dr. King's exact words of prayer were on that night. But maybe they were not much different than Samuel's words: “Speak, Lord, for I am listening.”

Again my siblings, my sisters, my brothers: I truly, fully, deeply believe that God has called, is calling, and will call each one of us — yes, every one of us. And when you hear

⁷ Beth L. Tanner in http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=224

⁸ Rev. Dr. Luke Powery in https://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-dr-luke-a-powery/samuel-3-prayer-and-prophetic-listening-mlk_b_1199189.html

⁹ Ibid

that call, it will be for you like it was for the young prophet Jeremiah where to not answer that call would be like a burning fire shut up in your bones, and you cannot hold it in. But first and foremost, if we want to hear that call, it is our task to listen. It is our task to learn the difference between a compelling human voice and the empowering voice of God. It is our task to continually listen for and listen to that voice not only when we are uncertain about our call, but especially when we believe we are certain — when we keep rushing to Eli's chamber and shouting "Here I am," but it's not Eli calling: it's God.

Every one of us is called. And every one of us can answer that call. It begins when we respond: "Here I am. Speak, Lord, for I am listening."

Amen.