

When God Calls
Grace Chapel, August 12, 20007

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3: 1-18

Surely this story from the scriptures of God's call to the boy Samuel is a familiar one. We more than likely each heard it in Sunday School when we were growing up. Jewish tradition reported by the ancient historian Josephus is that Samuel was about 12. It was during the time of the Judges in Israel. It was a chaotic time. We read in the last verse of the book of Judges:

Judges 21: 25 In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.

In theory, God was the Israelites' king, and as they remained faithful, he would shelter and bless them. When they turned away, trouble came, usually in the form of an invading army, such as the Moabites, Midianites, Hittites, or in Samuel's time, the Philistines. If the people turned back to God, he would raise someone up, a "Judge", who would lead them to victory and throw off the oppressor, and the Israelites would have peace again. That is, peace until the next generation turned their backs on God, and all the people again did what was right in their own eyes.

It was a time of terrible events that we usually avoid when we read the scriptures. It was also a time of occasions for miraculous grace given by God. In short, a time not too unlike our own: an uncertain world in chaos, crises of faith, with foreign threats looming, and shaky authorities. We read in the first verse that "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." This is also the common assumption in our day; hearing "voices" is usually taken by popular culture as a sign of craziness, rather than a communication from God.

Samuel is born during the time of Eli, who was the high priest. Eli also served as a judge. God answered Hannah's prayer for a child, and she dedicated her firstborn, Samuel, to God's service. So Samuel came to live at the temple in Shiloh, and served there under Eli. He is young. You might say he has the faith of a child. When Eli finally suspects what is really happening, that the voice Samuel hears is God calling, he tells Samuel how to reply. And Samuel does reply when God calls again. God then gives him a message.

So, why does God call Samuel? Why a child, of perhaps 12 years old at most? And, most of us wonder, why not others, who perhaps have more faith. Or maybe we would say a more mature faith. Why should Samuel, and not Eli, for example, hear God speak? Let's get more personal. Why does not God speak to us? You and me. Are we less important than a 12 year old boy? Does God care any less for us? What of others who say that they have heard God speak to them?

A good friend of mine once expressed it this way. "You know, John, I wish God would just speak to me." This was a man of great practical faith, a man I hold in high esteem as a model for what a Christian should be. But even he wanted that extra assurance, that

strengthening of his faith, that would come from having such direct communication from God. I can understand. I have wondered, and wished, the same thing. Maybe you have too.

There is a simple answer to this question of, "Why not me?" It is, well, "I don't know." But beyond that, there is also a problem with the question. It puts us first. It asks God to give us assurance by direct communication. It is a request to God to make our faith easier. In my readings in scripture, we can find many purposes in God's communications to particular individuals. But simply reassurance, that "Yes, God is here!" to strengthen a person's faith, does not seem to be one of them.

In most cases in the Bible, the message is one of prophesy or warning, as it is here in Samuel's case. But there are other possibilities. I was sharing a room for the night in a mission in New Orleans with Larry, a young man of perhaps 24 years, who was troubled. He was trying to stay off drugs, learn to read, and turn his life around. It was difficult, for a young man without resources, in that setting of depression and poverty and crime. That night he told me that he talked to Jesus, and Jesus talked to him, every day. That's where he found encouragement. I got the impression that he was surprised I didn't; he thought I needed to talk to Jesus more. Perhaps he was right. But I could not help but wonder, why is Jesus, or God, communicating with him so intimately, and not me? What is wrong with my faith? Is it that I lack faith?

Later, it occurred to me that Larry desperately needed that every-day conversation with Jesus. His situation was desperate. He had made the commitment of faith, but he was having a hard time managing his life. Maybe he needed God's direct intervention in ways I didn't. And later, upon reflecting on others who have been directly touched by God this way, it seems that they, too, had already made the commitment of faith, and God was helping in time of deep crisis. Then, too, there were other people, of demonstrably strong faith and good works, who did not claim to have daily conversations with God. Maybe I wasn't defective in my faith after all. Maybe, instead, this intimacy was a sign of God's love and presence with one of His children who was most in need. Ultimately, the why of God's direct communications with some, and not others, can't be known. God is not accountable to us for such answers.

But in the Bible, we can often see from the perspective of history, and in the revelation of the scriptures, what is going on. Returning to Samuel, then, God's purpose was apparently not directly to strengthen Samuel's faith. It did, and Samuel went on to be a great prophet. But the purpose of God's call to convey a message to Eli. We normally do not read this scripture passage that far, to hear God's words to Samuel. Disturbing words.

When the friend I mentioned earlier asked that God would speak to him, I eventually thought to remind him that in the Bible, God's word was usually not good news. In the scriptures, God's call is usually to a task that is unpleasant. Or dangerous. Consider Moses. He was content to herd sheep for his father in law Jethro. Did he want to go and tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go? How did he suppose Pharaoh would react to that? Would the Israelites even be appreciative when he had led them out into the wilderness? Moses made every excuse he could think of to avoid the task God had for him. Consider Jonah, who God called to go to Nineveh, the capitol of the evil Assyrians. He ran so far the other way that he ended up in a storm at sea, and we know how that went.

So too with God's call to Samuel. He is afraid to tell Eli the next morning. It is a message about the consequences of sin. You see, Eli has two sons, Hophni and Phineas, who are priests at the temple. But they are corrupt, choosing the best of the offerings for themselves. You can read about it in Chapter 2. Indeed, this was not the first communication to Eli. We can read that another prophet had delivered an earlier warning message. Eli knows he, and his sons, have a problem. For you see, God's call is not just for Samuel. In fact, it is not even primarily for Samuel. God is calling Eli. He is calling on him concerning the corruption of his sons.

Now, when we go back and re-read the prophecy delivered by Samuel, God says, "Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or burnt offering forever." This really does sound like a message of unavoidable doom. But is it? What would be the purpose? Does God take pleasure in telling someone that he's doomed? We can find an interesting parallel in the story of Moses. The Israelites in the wilderness rejected the report of Joshua and Caleb, the spies that reported that, yes, there were giants in Canaan, but with God's help they could conquer the Promised Land. The Israelites wept and complained that they would have been better left as slaves in Egypt. We read in Numbers 14: 11 and 12:

Numbers 14: 11 And the Lord said to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?
12: "I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they."

Moses doesn't just accept this as the final word. He argues with God, at some length. We read in verse 19 where he ends his plea with these words:

19 "Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now."
20. Then the Lord said, "I do forgive, just as you have asked... "

God relents. He changes his mind, as the words of scripture have it. There are consequences, but he does not destroy and abandon the Israelites.

But Eli doesn't argue. He doesn't plead for his sons. God is calling him, through Samuel's words, and through the words of the earlier prophet, to action. To do something that will save his two sons from the doom that is to follow. But Eli does nothing. He just accepts God's word, and says, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him." Maybe Eli is tired. He is old. His eyesight is failing. But maybe, just maybe, he can do something, something that may convey the immediacy and danger of this message to Hophni and Phineas, his sons. But he has given up.

You see, God is not just calling to Samuel, and to Eli. He is also calling to Hophni and Phineas, Eli's two corrupt sons. God has more faith that there is a chance for them to turn from their iniquity to the right, than their own father has. Eli has given up. He thinks his sons are hopeless; that they can't be saved. But God thinks otherwise. He is trying to reach them. In this

case, through Eli and Samuel. Perhaps also in other ways that we don't know about. For God does care about the lost, those that are hell-bent on satisfying their own desires, regardless of who they hurt along the way.

Why does God not speak to them more directly? We don't know. It's not impossible. Also in a story from Numbers, Chapters 22 to 25, we have the story of Baalam's ass. Baalam, a magician from the land of the Euphrates River, was hired by the Moabite king to put a curse on the Israelites as they traveled toward the promised land. On Balaam's way to Moab he is spoken to first by the animal he is riding, then by an angel, and finally by the Lord. Baalam is not a good person. Even after God's word is received, he suggests to the king of Moab how to corrupt and seduce the Israelites into turning away from God.

If God can speak to Baalam, why not Hophni and Phineas? Why not those others we know of who do evil? Surely something like that would change their ways! But, that's not necessarily so. It did not change Baalam. Jesus told a parable in Luke 16 about a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus. Both die, and Lazarus is in heaven with Abraham. The rich man, who is in Hell, pleads that Lazarus be sent back to warn his brothers. Abraham tells the rich man, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

Sometimes people choose unfaith. Sometimes they cannot be reached. But God is trying, as here he tries once more through Samuel and Eli, to reach Hophni and Phineas. They have time and opportunity to repent. It is apparently several years before the battle at Ebenezer where the Philistines rout the Israelites, capture the Arc of the Covenant, and kill Eli's two sons.

What do Hophni and Phineas need to do? The prophesy says that their sins will not be forgiven by sacrifice or offering. This makes sense. After all, these forms of showing repentance obviously mean nothing to the sons of Eli, for they are already showing their disrespect for God and these sacraments. They have corrupted and turned their backs on the one way known to them in that day, the sacrifice of repentance, that would reconcile them to God. Now we know that even so, repentance and forgiveness can be found for those who seek. In the words of the prophet Micah, "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." This is what Hophni and Phineas need to do. The symbols of repentance are useless without actual repentance. God's love reaches out, but Eli's sons do not grasp it.

Ultimately, God's call reaches beyond Hophni and Phineas. He hears the cries and prayers of the oppressed, in this case the Israelite people who are being treated unfairly by these two corrupt priests. He heard the cries of the Israelite slaves in Egypt. He heard the cries of the Israelites under the subjugation of the Hittites, the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Midianites, and the Philistines during the time of the Judges. He hears the cries of the oppressed even in our day, and his Word continues to call for justice. In the scriptures we have read, God's call and God's love first touch Samuel, then call to Eli, then call to Hophni and Phineas for repentance, then call for justice for His people, the Israelites. Finally, this message of God's love and call for justice reaches us in our day through the scriptures.

This happens over and over again. God keeps calling. It is interesting that as Samuel grows old, his two sons, Joel and Abijah, set themselves up as corrupt judges in Beersheba, and accept bribes and pervert justice. This is why the Israelites demanded a king; they had given up on judges. So God gave them a king, Saul. And then David. Then other kings, most of whom were corrupt. And being kings, they were even less bounded in their corruption than the judges and priests were. God, in his love and in his seeking the best for the Israelites, His people, sent the prophets. But they were killed or persecuted. After the failure of the kings, and then the exile, in the fullness of time, God sent Jesus. He calls to us with this same love, to repent and follow God's way, giving of self for others.

We have come full circle. His voice calls to all of us today. Not necessarily as a voice you hear, as Samuel did. We can hear His voice through the scriptures, and through the Word lived out in the acts of His children of faith. He asks of us not burnt offerings or sacrifices, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. And ultimately, when our days are done, He will call us to himself. As reported in the Revelation of John, Jesus calls saying:

Rev 22: 17 The Spirit and the bride say "Come" And let everyone who hears say, "Come. And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift."

Amen.