

Sermon: January 14, 2024
Whose Voice? The Call of Samuel
1 Samuel 3: 1-20

Prayer: Wake us up O God in our deep slumber and give us ears that truly listen to what you are calling us to do. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

A preacher once suggested that an appropriate title for today's sermon about the call of young Samuel should be "The Danger of Sleeping in Church." A story was told of a man who kept falling asleep during the sermon. The pastor was getting frustrated and, one Sunday, decided to teach the man a lesson. As was the pastor's practice, he started slowly, almost in a monotone -- sure enough, the man soon fell into a deep sleep. The pastor then said to the congregation, "Everyone who wants to go to heaven, stand up." Everyone stood ... except, of course, the man who was fast asleep. The pastor had everyone sit down. Then he gently said, "Everyone who wants to go to hell," and with a bang on the pulpit and a rise in his voice, "stand up!" The sleeping man snorted awake and jumped to his feet as everyone around started to chuckle. The man looked at all the people sitting around him, then looked at the pastor and said, "Pastor, I don't know what we're voting on. But it looks like you and I are the only ones in favor of it."

It is difficult to talk about the life of Samuel without telling the story of his mother, Hannah. She is a woman of prayer and of great faith. Her name means "grace". Her husband's name is Elkanah, a wealthy, well-known citizen in his community, a man who knows his roots. There are some aspects of Hannah's story that we don't find easy to relate to; she was in a polygamous marriage, and she was barren – for a certain period of time. In that period, women lost their status in the community if they were barren – if they were childless. There are many people today who know all about that sort of grief, and even if we aren't familiar with it, we've all had times when we longed for things and our longing was not fulfilled. Hannah seems to understand that if it was indeed God who closed her womb, then only God could give her children. And she persistently went to God in prayer. That if God would grant her wish to have a boy, Hannah would offer him to serve God. Miraculously, God blessed Hannah and Samuel was born. Hannah was true to her word and as soon as the boy was weaned between the age of two and five, Hannah brought Samuel to priest Eli as Samuel's mentor. She exposed Samuel to

the failing priesthood of the aging and blind Eli. Yet, it is through that old man and his new home that Samuel hears the voice of God.

Samuel was very young, living away from home. I'm sure there were times when he was lonely or anxious or bewildered. Certainly, he wasn't used to listening to the voice of God. Perhaps the priest, Eli, did not do his job as a mentor well. The danger of sleeping in church happened to the young Samuel one night. Three times his name was called – three times he went to Eli – three times he was asked to go back to bed. And for the fourth time, the persistent voice came calling again. And Samuel was puzzled. Could it be that voice was from God calling him? Could it be that he, a mere boy, who lacks wisdom and understanding, was receiving a word from God? And this time, Samuel replied “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening”.

Have you heard the voice of God calling you? The story of Samuel suggests that God's word was rare in those days and visions were infrequent. In our time, we fear mistaking the Divine voice for just another human or non-human sound; there are so many noises in our world competing for our attention. We tend not to pay attention to the surrounding voices, but it is also difficult to be still and know that God is speaking to us. We take a big risk – a leap of faith, when we dare to believe that God is calling our name, trying to get our attention. The question is – how do you know that is God's voice calling you?

This past Tuesday in our lectionary group, we talked about ways God has called and is still calling us in our lives. Let me share my story of how I was called to ministry. As a young person in the Philippines, I was very involved in the life of the church. I was a youth leader, a choir director, a board secretary, a Sunday school teacher, a mover in many ways. Everybody thought I'd be a wonderful pastor, but I did not listen to those voices at first. I completed a teaching degree and landed a job as a public-school teacher. But the voice of God calling me for the fourth time came to me through an earthquake. It happened 33 years ago when an earthquake devastated the city where we lived. I was teaching at that time when the earth shook. Surrounded by uncertainties about what the present and the future hold, I was confronted with a voice deep in my heart that said, is God calling me in this situation? Like the first followers of Jesus, I dropped my net, resigned as a grade school teacher and went to seminary to prepare for my ordination as a minister in the United Methodist Church. One year short of my graduation,

an opportunity opened up for me and my family to immigrate to Canada. Upon arrival in 1994, I did not hesitate to continue heeding that voice – God’s voice that called me to be a minister. Many years have passed – after ignoring the call so many times and walking in different directions, I gave in to my call to ministry, worked hard to complete all the requirements and suddenly, I found myself being ordained in 2009. It was a Samuel moment for me! I had heard that call many times, stumbling and falling for a long time. My ordination was an affirmation of that call and a moment when the Elis gathered around to empower an ordinant like me to move forth in faith and trust. And here I am!

How do we know and trust the voice of God calling us? Rev. Patricia de Jong offers inspiring words: *“How else, except to do like the characters of today’s story. Trust, listen and take a risk, venturing by faith. Perhaps our true calling is buried somewhere in our innate natures as reflections and refractions of the Light of the Divine Presence in each one of us. As followers of a spirit-filled path, we can say it another way: we are called into the future by a resonating voice deep within. How can we listen to God in the midst of the noise of this life? What does it mean to listen to the voice of God? What does the voice of God sound like? How do you know that the voice you are hearing is God’s? How would you respond?”*

God speaks. But the first task of a prophet or those wanting to respond, is to listen. Listening is discernment in the process. And it makes me wonder: when have we missed something important? Not just a phone call or an email, but something deeper. When have we chosen to ignore instead of responding? When should we have done something but have been passive? When should we have spoken up but have been silent? God's voice is all around us - in a news story about the hungry, the homeless or those who have inadequate health care. The voice nags at us to do something about domestic violence or being an ally to marginalized groups of people. The voice comes to us through a phone call from a friend or a family member or a stranger that signals a need. Or a conversation about politics and the ongoing wars in many parts of the world that stirs us to humanitarian acts. God's voice is calling us over and over again.

We can’t answer every need with an all-out response; there isn’t enough time or resources or energy. But some needs will call out to us more than others because each one of us has different “receptors, different gifts, abilities and resources and different ways of responding.

If you are having trouble sleeping through the night, you're not alone. Most of the world does. And, certainly, Samuel did. He tossed and turned, trying to figure out if the voice was Eli's or God's. If you are having trouble sleeping through the night, perhaps God is calling you to a new life.

God's voice is persistent. Even if we are hard of hearing or fail to listen, God is assuring us of God's love, guiding us here and now. God's voice is calling us in the depth of our being, to be, to become what we were created to be, to fulfill the promise and potentiality of God's presence within us.

Let me close with an excerpt of a poem written by Andrew King:

*“You and me on our beds, our couches, you and me by our lamps.
You and me under spreading trees, or peering at the sky through windows;
you and me at our office desks, fingering the plastic of keyboards;
you and me in our living-rooms, or sitting at our kitchen tables;
you and me, so yearning for hope, so longing for meaning, truth, or joy –
may we become aware of the One who is searching for us;
awake to the One who knows and calls our names
longing for us to listen: the God of promise and of invitation.
Speak God – for we are listening.” Amen.*

Sources:

BCUC Lectionary Group

Andrew King – The One Whose Heart is Searching

The Calling – Pat de Jong

David E. Leininger, SermonStudio.