

When God Calls...
By Rev. Sharon Lee MacArthur
For Berkeley Chinese Community Church
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1 Samuel 3:1-10

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli.
The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, 'Samuel! Samuel!'
and he said, 'Here I am!' and ran to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call; lie down again.'
So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, 'Samuel!'
Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.'
But he said, 'I did not call, my son; lie down again.'
Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.
The Lord called Samuel again, a third time.
And he got up and went to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.'
Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy.
Therefore Eli said to Samuel, 'Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!'
And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'



I remember reading about an interview with a pro football player. This player was telling a sports reporter why he chose to go to a certain city to play ball. He was honest enough to say that God spoke to him and he responded back. "In other words I talk to God."

He was the late Reggie White, who at that time had just completed the terms of his contract with the Philadelphia Eagles, where he had made the All-star team almost every year since he became a professional. After his contract with Philadelphia had been fulfilled, Reggie, who is an ordained minister and nicknamed "The Minister of Defense" – had been free to sign with any team he wished. And he had several offers that would have made him a very rich man. But when decision time came, he shocked most football observers and many of his friends by signing with the team which was located in the smallest city of all the National Football League franchises – the Green Bay Packers.

The reporter asked Reggie how he had reached his decision to play for the Packers. . "I spent a lot of time praying about this," he said. "And one day as I prayed, I heard God say, 'Reggie, go to Green Bay.' So that's what I did." His interviewer must have looked at him strangely because here's what Reggie said next: "You know, when you tell people you've been talking to God, they don't have a problem with that. That's praying. If you believe in that sort of thing, it's okay. But when you say that God talked to YOU, then they think you're crazy or something! Isn't prayer supposed to be a conversation with God? And in a conversation, don't BOTH parties talk?"

God spoke to Reggie – God called Reggie and Reggie heard...Reggie listened. Reggie must have been tuned into God...just like our Samuel in our scripture reading for today. God spoke to Samuel and Samuel heard.



So if and when God speaks to us, when God calls to us – are we tuned into God enough to hear? Is it something we're born with? In the genes or something? Is it something we can be trained to do? Is it something we can train ourselves to do?

I think this passage has clues for us...

And like everything in life – there's more to the story than this nice little short story of a little boy hearing God's voice. Don't you have questions?

Like – why is this story part of the Bible? What is the context?

what's happening in the world around Samuel when Samuel is called?

In fact, why was Samuel called? What's his story – who is his family?

If we believe that God is forever trying to bring the world and all its creatures toward becoming and that's why God calls people to help, **what were the plans that God has drawn up for Samuel?**

OK – context –

we understand from the first few verses that the word of the Lord was rare in those days – is that because God was silent? Or because practically everyone had tuned out God?



Was the world so noisy and full of itself that no one heard a call to return to God's fold to work for peace and reconciliation among people? Sounds like the world was gonna need someone to head the world

toward peace...it occurs to me that THAT was Jesus – God in human form – who would be born with a title – the Prince of Peace. Could it be that Samuel has a part to play in this multigenerational saga?

AND in this noisy world where God has not been heard, we are plunked into a quiet scene - it was the middle of the night - when folks were sleeping at the temple.

It was quiet when Samuel heard the voice calling in the night.

For young Samuel – life might have been a simple one – he was there to serve the Lord – he was dedicated by his mom to do just that. To learn – to be open to whatever lessons came his way...Remember Samuel?



He was the boy that was brought to Eli to be raised at the temple.

His mother was Hannah, one of two wives of Elkanah. Hannah was the one who was childless. The other wife had many sons and daughters, but Hannah was childless.

Hannah poured out her troubles about being childless to God and promised that if God would give her a male child, she would offer him as a nazirite - one consecrated - to be raised in a temple.

God **did** give her a male child; she named him Samuel and she kept her promise.

Hannah's first born was a little older than "just weaned" -

somewhere between being brought to the temple and our passage today, We might not remember that the once barren Hannah ultimately had three sons and two daughters! Samuel was not her only child – so let's do the math here if we're wondering exactly how old Samuel was. Hannah had five children and if Hannah had one child per year - that's five years.

I'm not sure what the "age of weaning is" but if we say, two or three - Samuel was probably no younger than 7 or 8.

And he is called a boy - so, probably younger than 13...

So probably Samuel is somewhere between 7 and 13 in our story today.

So - as soon "as he was weaned", Hannah brought her first born son to Eli and reminded him that she was the woman who had prayed some years back for a child and that this Samuel was God's blessing. She had come with him to keep her end of the bargain...that Samuel would stay there with Eli to serve God.

That's the Samuel who heard God calling in the night...

This God who gave us Samuel in today's reading from First Samuel...

If we were to follow Samuel's story beyond today's chapter - we find out that Samuel grows up to have an important role to play in the Judeo-Christian story...he succeeds Eli, who is his mentor, he has an important part in uniting the tribes against the growing threat of the Philistines.



Samuel is the one who anointed Saul as king of Israel, and later went to Bethlehem to anoint David as Saul's successor. AHA! DAVID – forefather of Jesus – born 28 generations later! Samuel – is indeed an important player in the Judeo-Christian story and God's hope for peace in the world!

This is who God is calling -

God knows something the rest of us don't know...

It's not the kind of "knowing" most of understand as knowing....



Did you hear about the small town prosecuting attorney? His first witness in a trial was a grandmotherly, elderly woman...he asked her "Mrs. Williams, do you know me?"

She responded, "Sure - I know you...I've known you since you were a little boy - and frankly, you've been a big disappointment to me - You lie, you're not nice to your wife, you manipulate people and talk about them behind their backs. You think you're a big shot, but you're not...Yes, I know you!"

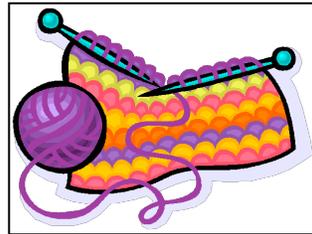
Flustered, he pointed across the room and asked, "Do you know the attorney for the defense, Mrs. Williams?"

"Yes, I do...I've known him since he was a youngster, too. I used to baby-sit him for his parents. He's also been a real disappointment to me...he's lazy, bigoted and has a drinking problem. He's bad with relationships and his law practice is shady. I sure do know him."

At this point the judge rapped the courtroom to silence and called both counselors to the bench. He covered his mike and said in a very quiet voice..."If either of you asks her if she knows me, you'll be jailed for contempt."

Mrs. Williams knows the counselors (by the way - also the judge) with an earthly, worldly understanding of “knowing” - one’s deeds, history - what has been.

God knows us in another way - seen through God’s eyes - God sees the hope in each of us...no matter how young, no matter how old, no matter who we are or where we are in life’s journey...God sees us that way and is patient enough to watch our lives unfold and patient enough to wait for us to hear God’s call...



When I was a child, I would sit next to my mother while she knitted. There wasn’t a picture, pattern, or anything for me to see beyond her stitches.

When I asked my mother what she was making, her answer was always, You’ll see...you’ll see. It was magical when she had knit enough for me to recognize what the finished piece might be. So it is with life and the seemingly irreconcilable stories we live....

Growing up in an immigrant family that observed folk Chinese rites and rituals, I thought I had no religion. The world outside the home was predominantly Christian - so I thought Christianity was a Western religion. In order to fit in, I hid my Chinese traditions and stories. Little did I know that God was making me in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the universe. You’ll see...you’ll see.

Who knew this girl who grew up with no religion would respond to God’s call to ordained ministry? What is a call? The definition that works for me is “A Call is something I cannot NOT do” Sometimes illogical, sometimes, non sensical...always a God-thing!

I hope you don’t think this is all about God’s calling us to a life’s work or shifting careers or a humongous task to run away from like Jonah...sounds scary doesn’t it? Scary enough for us to tune God out!

But there are those times when God calls in little more subtle ways than a voice in the night that wakes you up.



Those of you who were at Morrie Chun’s memorial service yesterday know that I visited him in the hospital hours before he passed on to eternal life.

What you may not know is how that all happened...it was a small story of God calling...

Monday was Memorial Day – it was a busy one for me – full of meetings and preparations for Jessie Yip’s burial. But I knew Tuesday would be even more busy – so I had this gut feeling that I needed to go visit Morrie!

I remembered the many times that I didn’t listen to my gut and didn’t to visit someone critically ill and missed an opportunity to visit and pray with the patient and family members before the patient passed away. Living with the guilt is no fun!

This time I listened to my gut even though it was already after 9 in the evening. When I arrived at Alta Bates, his daughter Madeline and son Brian were there. Morrie was awake, alert and smiled his Morrie smile to respond to our comments and questions. The day before he participated actively in our conversation. This day he was quiet and said no words but would nod and smile!

We knew the inevitable was close as we prayed and recited the Lord’s prayer holding hands. Six hours later he was home with God.

So what I’m trying to say is God calls us for little things – and we might “hear” it as a gut feeling to go visit a patient...

Each of us might “hear” God’s call in our own way – God’s “voice” might be in a sudden sighting of a butterfly when least expected.



Like for my college roommate Gay. Her father was in the hospital and unconscious...she had been there all night with him and left for a cup of coffee in the morning sun when she saw a brilliant butterfly unlike any she had ever seen in Fresno. It fluttered toward her and lighted on the chair next to her. She knew her father had died. When she ran back to his hospital room, she was not surprised that the code blue personnel and equipment were there. And Gay was open to hearing God...



The question is....are we?

Let us pray –

Beloved God,

You know us inside and out and/ you still call us to serve you.

You know when we are often hesitant, afraid, and wish to remain hidden.

Help us to be open to listening for and hearing your call...

Help us to answer your call with "Here I am Lord"...

And empower us to follow you when you call us to help you transform this world into your vision for a heaven on earth...one conversation at a time...one act of kindness and compassion at a time. Amen!