

“Who Gets the Call?”  
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*1 Samuel 3: 1 – 10*

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> Then the LORD called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and he said, “Here I am!” <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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.” <sup>7</sup> Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” <sup>11</sup> Then the LORD said to Samuel, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. <sup>12</sup> On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. <sup>13</sup> For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. <sup>14</sup> Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.”

<sup>15</sup> Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. <sup>16</sup> But Eli called Samuel and said, “Samuel, my son.” He said, “Here I am.” <sup>17</sup> Eli said, “What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.” <sup>18</sup> So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, “It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him.”

<sup>19</sup> As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. <sup>20</sup> And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.

Before Samuel and after Joshua, the Israelites are led by a series of judges who rise up in difficult times. As the book of Judges comes to an end, tribal wars threaten to tear the people apart. The promised land is not easy and without conflict. <sup>1</sup>

We enter the book of 1 Samuel in the house of a man named Elkanah, a man who has two wives. Peninnah and Hannah. Now, all parents know that it isn’t advisable to have favorite children. And it is no wiser to have favorite wives. But Elkanah’s favorite wife is Hannah, the problem was that she could not, did not have children. Wanting to have children in this age was more than a desire to reproduce, it was your identity, your financial security, your worth. And Hannah could not have

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1812](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1812)

children. It made her the object of ridicule and as the Bible says, “she was provoked, severely” because of it.

As anyone who has struggled with infertility will tell you, it is a fierce struggle and a dehumanizing one. To deal with it, Hannah did what a woman of faith would do, Hannah would go to the temple to pray. And at the temple she prayed. Really, really prayed. Not a polite prayer of soft words, but a prayer that consumed her body and spirit. She wept. She shouted. She shook. So moved was she that the priest who sat on his seat and watched those who came to the temple thought that she was drunk.

Eli, the priest, accused her of being drunk. But why he heard the real story of her prayer, Eli was moved “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.”

And while some women who pray just as fervently are not led to this ending, Hannah gets pregnant, and gives birth to Samuel, whose name means “name of God.”<sup>2</sup> As soon as he is weaned, she takes Samuel to the temple and dedicates him to God.

And who did Samuel grow up to be? A man of some renown. Frederick Buechner describes him in this way:<sup>3</sup>

“Samuel was a combination prophet, judge, judge, and one-man band. When the old curmudgeon wasn't out in the field trying to fight off the Philistine guerrillas, he was riding his circuit trying to keep the tribes of Israel honest, and when he wasn't doing that, he was giving them hell for cheating on Yahweh every time a new fertility god showed up with a come-hither look in his eye.” Or, as our reading for this morning says, “*Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.*”

But what happened in-between Samuel being taken to the temple and Samuel being the prophet that was trustworthy unto the Lord?

How did that come to be?

It starts by understanding what Samuel did at the temple. Eli was the priest in charge. And Samuel served him. Which is why he was sleeping near the ark. He was there as a guard, as a ward.<sup>4</sup> Samuel did not serve in some glorified job, he was a simple servant.

It is there that he hears a voice calling him in the middle of the night.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/8050.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Buechner, Frederick, “Pecluiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who.” (New York: HarperCollins) 1979. Page 170.

<sup>4</sup> Batten, Loring W. (Loring Woart). 1900. “The sanctuary at Shiloh, and Samuel's sleeping therein.” *Journal Of Biblical Literature* 19, no. 1: 29-33. ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed January 20, 2018).

Ruffin, Michael L. 1997. “First Samuel 3:1-20.” *Interpretation* 51, no. 2: 175-178. ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed January 20, 2018).

Once, twice, three times the voice calls him, but Samuel, each time, thinks that it must be Eli. And that makes sense. He serves the Lord through Eli. And being awoken in the middle of the night is not, was not unusual.

Eli, who is almost blind, is the one who sees. He tells Samuel what to do. What to say. So that he can hear and answer God's call. God calls the fourth time.

It is a dramatic moment. "Here I am Lord, Is it I, Lord, I have heard you calling in the night."

But why was it so hard for Samuel to think that God was calling him?

Well, because Samuel isn't who you would suspect God would call. He is the candidate nobody considered to be a candidate. Eli had sons. They are the ones who will be taking over the family business. They don't have great reputations, but that doesn't matter. They have the qualifications that matter. Education. Pedigree. If God were going to talk to anyone, it would, people thought, be them.

Samuel is a servant boy. No more. No less.

But. It Is Samuel that God calls.

For five years I served on the General Assembly Nominating Committee. We were 16 people from across the country who were tasked with nominating people to serve the various entities and committees of the denomination. The Presbyterian Foundation. Board of Pensions. Judicial Commission. We had the amazing privilege that almost no nominating committee has. We had about five times more applications than places to serve. And so we had to choose.

On this committee we were young and old. Men and women. Conservative and progressive. Middle of the road. Up and comers, about to retire. We were different, from different places, with different outlooks. But across the years, we learned about one another and we trusted one another. It was, truly, one of the most faithful experiences I've ever had.

One day, we found ourselves at an impasse. There was a particularly difficult and important position to fill and there several candidates who were qualified. We each gave our nomination speech for the candidate we wanted the others to choose, and all of our speeches were a variation on the same theme: Our candidate was both the best and the brightest.

We began discussing these speeches and our options, comparing qualifications and superlatives, when one of our members asked for the floor. He was a member with whom I likely would have disagreed with on all of the hot-button theological issues of the day. But he had asked for the floor, and so we all listened.

He said, "I've heard all of your speeches and these are, in fact, some fine candidates with some strong qualifications. But I keep hearing something that I'm not sure I'm comfortable with. You keep talking about these candidates as the best and the brightest, and I'm just not sure that's what God did, or what God wants us to do. God called a stutterer to lead the people out of Egypt. Paul had killed Christians

and suffered from illness, and he built the church. The disciples were untrained and often common. Sarah laughed when God told her she would have a baby. God didn't call the best and the brightest, God called people who were often surprising but had the right gifts to grow and lead in faith. I'm not sure how this affects this particular position, but I wanted us to make sure we keep in mind that the best and the brightest isn't God's criteria, and maybe it shouldn't be ours, either. Our task isn't to find the most qualified person for this position, it's to find the person God is calling."

He was exactly right. So right, nobody could say anything. We declared a recess so we could regroup and come back with a more faithful mindset.

I've thought of this text because I think that, I hope that, we all want to hear God's voice. We all want to know where God is calling us to go and how God is calling us to live.

Samuel, one of the greatest prophets of the Hebrew Bible started as a lowly servant, who was expected to do and go no further than his role as a servant.

Because I think that we, too, live in a time when the world of the Lord is rare. Precious. Sought after.

- And sometimes we are the Samuel of the story,  
being called when we are the last ones to realize it.
- Sometimes we are Eli, seeing what someone else doesn't.
- Sometimes we are Hannah, who wants something so much,  
and when she gets it she is so thankful she doesn't hold onto it,  
she shares it with the world.
- Sadly, sometimes we are Penneniah, so insecure in being known and loved by God  
that we define ourselves by what we have and what others do not have.
- Sometimes we are Elkanah, not wanting anyone that we love to be sad, even if we cannot fix it.

We all have places in this story. And a calling. And are known and loved by God. Our Psalm for today reminds us of that.

But there's another thing that I simply can't escape from today's text. And it is the reminder about what success truly is.

Success isn't having the right education or place, it's in knowing and hearing and responding to the love of God. It's in being faithful.

What do we want for our children? Real success isn't in the careers they find or the grades they bring home, it's in the faith that is in their hearts and how they treat one another, how they live out God's love in the world.

What is success for the church? I'm likely far too proud of our stewardship and balanced budget, because the real success is in what I see you living- the meals shared without being asked. The

moving over in the pew to welcome a stranger. Coats shared, treasures given, generously. Sharing your faith, and admitting where your faith has growing edges. Water and word, bread and grace.

And what is success for you? God used the servant Samuel, an unwed mother in Nazareth, and merchant in Thyatira, a soldier in Capernaum. How will God use you? And how is God using someone else, someone you might not, probably won't expect.

"Here I am Lord, Is it I, Lord, I have heard you calling in the night."

May this be our refrain, brother and sisters, for there is nothing apart from this.