

1Samuel 3:1-10
Psalm 139:1-5,12-17
1 Corinthians 6:12-20
John 1:43-51

Epiphany 2B
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Samuel, Samuel...

Can you imagine what it would be like to hear the voice of the living God calling your name? Maybe you have heard God calling. Maybe you were walking along on a blustery day and found yourself turning abruptly because you were quite sure you heard your name in the sighs of the wind. Or maybe you were sitting in the quiet of your reading place and noticed yourself cocking your head before you even realized that there had been whisper meant just for you. Or maybe there was a night when you awoke from a dream because someone was calling your name and really, it was no longer a dream. I don't think we need to wonder about whether or not God calls us... surely God does. The better questions are: How will I recognize the voice of the living God, and how will I respond?

Hearing the voice of the living God calling us by name isn't something we're accustomed to listening for. And even if it is our greatest heart's desire, only a few of us have had experiences anything like Samuel's. While Samuel did respond, it was to another voice, Eli's voice, and not to the source of his call. But even though he didn't understand where it was coming from, even though he didn't get it right at first, he knew the voice mattered and he followed until he did get it right.

Recently, I've been in several conversations, listening and talking about the public perception of Christianity, about the people who wave banners for Jesus and flags for America, people who seem to believe that Jesus is a white American rather than a brown Palestinian Jew. These people claim they are standing on the side of Jesus, that Jesus is on their side, all the while condemning people of color, people who aren't straight, people who are mentally ill, people who are poor... all the people whose side Jesus stands on. These people claim Jesus for only for themselves and those like themselves, and not for the life of the world. That is a "voice of Christianity" that sounds utterly unlike the Jesus we read in the scriptures, the Jesus who said the first law is the law of love.

What voice are they hearing? They seem so sure of their convictions, but they don't seem to realize the voice of the one calling them is not the VOICE. But because "God is on OUR side" is such a rallying cry, such a screaming loud voice, and so very self-satisfying, it seems a popular voice, indeed. The scriptures tell us that Samuel didn't yet know the Lord, so we may assume that's why he didn't recognize that mysterious voice as God's own. That might be true of the

“God on OUR side” screaming Christians, too. Maybe they don’t yet know the Lord. The things they do, the things they say don’t look or sound like Jesus to me. When did you hear Jesus say “white people matter, brown and black people don’t?” Jesus was brown.

Even though he didn’t yet know the Lord, even though he didn’t first recognize the Voice as the voice of God, the boy Samuel knew he was being called. It seems strange he didn’t know the Lord, because everything about Samuel’s life had been steeped in God. Samuel’s story begins with the heartrending account of a barren woman begging God for a son. In fact, she prayed so fervently and incessantly that the priest Eli told her to remove her drunken self from the temple! *“But I’ve drunk no wine nor strong drink”* Hannah cried! “I am pouring out my soul to God.” Ahh, said Eli and once he recognized the holy thing that was happening right in front of his eyes, he assured her that God had heard her and that surely God would bless her. In due time, Hannah conceived and bore a son, Samue, whose name means “God has heard.” As soon as he was weaned, Hannah joyfully took Samuel to that same priest Eli, returning her first-born-miracle-baby-boy to the God who had given him. And there in the temple, Samuel grew and loved and served God under the care and instruction of the old priest Eli.

The soon to be-prophet Samuel reminds us that it is possible to be surrounded by all the trappings of religion, to spend one’s days doing the work of the temple, even to sleep at the foot of the very throne of God, and still not know the Lord. We cannot know the fullness of God through books or buildings or ritual or even scripture. As it turns out, we can only fully know God, by experiencing God. And that happens in relationship. And while all those other things – ritual, architecture, scholarship and scripture matter deeply, they matter because they help us to deepen our relationships with God and with each other. Samuel – Samuel. That was God calling the boy into relationship.

At first they didn’t understand, but when it dawned on Eli that the Lord was calling the boy, he helped him to follow God’s call. That’s the nature of calling you know – it’s communal. Sometimes we can’t see what’s right in front of us, sometimes we can’t hear what’s being said to us, sometimes we can’t feel God’s presence in our solitude. So we look for God together. We listen for God together. We worship God together and we come to know God’s presence in each other. It took the aging and nearly blind Eli to help Samuel “see” that it was God who was calling. It took Philip to help Nathanael understand it was Jesus, the Messiah, who was calling. It took my mother and my study partner and my discernment committee and many mentors and all of the street people I’ve encountered, to help me understand what God was calling me into.

We need each other, especially the most unlikely others, to help us to see and to hear, because if we only listen to the people who sound just like us, we will never hear the true voice of the living God. Who are the people in your life who help you hear the voice of the living God? Who are your unlikely others? The Rev Dr. MLK Jr is one of the unlikely others. Dr. King didn’t set out

to be a martyr, didn't set out to be a Ph.D., didn't set out to be a Nobel Peace Prize winner... he was a deeply faithful man who heard the Voice, and committed his life to following the God of justice, mercy, love and peace, Jesus of Nazareth. As we honor Dr. King this weekend, it's good to look at his life in light of the stories of Samuel and the stories of all the disciples Jesus called by name. Dr. King's response to God's call was to help others hear God calling them by name. And he did that, even at the cost of his life. King knew that his work was dangerous, knew that his Gospel preaching was not what the powerful and comfortable white people wanted to hear, knew that God's passion for justice made some people very angry.

But still he spoke the word of God as he heard it. It probably wasn't without fear and trembling, but he was bold in his proclamation and in his insistence on non-violent civil disobedience. He was a brilliant man - his life as a preacher and teacher made good use of the many good gifts he'd been given. And still, all that brilliance, all that wisdom, all that gorgeous and inspired rhetoric wasn't enough to satisfy his soul. "My father was a preacher" he said. "My grandfather was a preacher, my great-grandfather was a preacher, my only brother is a preacher, my daddy's brother is a preacher. So I didn't have much choice... [but] one day I realized [that what I had] was inherited religion. I had never had an experience with God." Just like Samuel, just like Nathanael, just like you and like me, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. needed to know God, and needed to be known by God.

Real relationship between human and divine is not reserved just for the prophets and sages. It's for all of us. And Jesus, the one who links heaven and earth, human and divine, makes our deep connection with God possible. We are God's beloved. We are somebody, because we are known and loved. God knows each and every one of us, and God has called us by name, gifting us with gifts uniquely our own so that we can do God's work in the world, blessing and loving the world back into wholeness. There are so many who long to hear God's call to them. So many who long for God's boundless and overflowing love. And our work is to speak into their longing. "Come and see," Philip said, and Nathanael's preconceived notions about Jesus of Nazareth fell away. The priest Eli said "Say 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening'", and the Lord was made known to the budding prophet Samuel. "I have a dream" Dr. King said, and multitudes saw themselves as beloved of God.

We are all being called by God - prophets and fisher people and everybody in-between. Our job is to listen and respond to God's particular call to us, and then, in community to help each other discern the Voice of the living God. How will we listen and encourage others to hear? How will we know what God is calling us into?

Listen...

The boy Samuel once dreamed the Voice was calling his name;
Fishermen once heard the Voice when a stranger bid them follow;

That Voice still beckons today... can you hear? What will you say?
Here I am. Send me.

Moses protested vehemently as the Voice spoke from the burning bush;
Mary sat, amazed as the Voice proclaimed impending birth;
That Voice still beckons today ... can you hear? What will you say?
Here I am. Send me.

Rosa Parks followed the Voice to the front of the bus;
Martin Luther King, Jr. heard the Voice through the beatings and the burnings;
That Voice still beckons today ... can you hear? What will you say?
Here I am. Send me.

The Voice beckons from humble places...
in the tears of hungry children,
in the cries of the frail and frightened elderly,
in the pleas of those whose dreams have been too long set aside;
That Voice still beckons today ... can you hear? What will you say?
Here I am. Send me.

A shy believer pauses to listen to the Voice;
A struggling church hears the Voice and turns;
That Voice still beckons today ... can you hear? What will you say?
Amen.