

## Someone's Calling Your Name

1 Samuel 3:1-11, 19-20

June 25, 2023

Rev. Jeffrey Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church, San Rafael, CA

*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>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.*

*1 Samuel 3:1-11, 19-20*

I know you are used to seeing a Cochran-Carney in the pulpit, and I didn't want to disappoint! It's just probably not the one you were expecting! It is a pleasure to be with you this morning, and share the message.

Listen! Someone's calling your name! Can you hear it? Maybe it has been a while since you've heard your name spoken in warm, loving tones. God calls you in a friendly, affirming, loving voice, just the way you are. The world is often not so kind when calling your name. Sometimes the world takes your name in vain – you know how that goes, especially during these contentious times in which we live.

On the subject of names, Presbyterian pastor and novelist Frederick Buechner writes:

"If someone mispronounces my name in some foolish way, I have the feeling that what's foolish is me ... If my name were different, I would be different. When I tell somebody my name, I have given him or her a hold over me that he didn't have before. If he calls it out, I stop, look and listen whether I want to or not."

Wishful Thinking, p. 12

One thing is for sure – No one knows our name, no one calls our name like the Holy One, who spoke in the gospel of John, saying, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” The Holy One is calling your name ... today ... tomorrow ... and for the rest of your life.

Of course, God doesn’t just stop with your name. It’s a sure bet that once God starts calling your name, your heart, time and energy will be required as well. Even if you’re a life-long Christian – God has something *new* in store for you. Sometimes for Christians, the Good News becomes Old News.

But God says, “Behold, I am doing a *new* thing.” God is a God of new beginnings.

God did a new thing in the life of Samuel. It was also a new experience for the elder Priest Eli. The Word of God was rare in those days, the writer says. There were not many visions. But for young Samuel, it was a brand new exciting opportunity for God to transform his life.

It was during the night when Samuel first heard a voice calling him: “Samuel! Samuel!” The voice woke him from his sleep and he was confused.

Naturally, he went to Eli the priest, thinking he had called him. “Here I am Eli, for you called me.” But Eli said, “I did not call you, Samuel . . . Go back to bed ....” So Samuel went back to bed. But a strange thing happened – the voice called him again – “Samuel! Samuel!”

When God is trying to get your attention, God does not stop after just one try. God comes to us again and again, just like God did with Samuel. So after Samuel went back to bed, a voice called out to him again: “Samuel! Samuel!” Again, Samuel went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” “No, no, Samuel, I did not call you. Go back and lie down.”

Well, this happened three times, and finally, the wise Eli said, “You know, Samuel, I believe something out of the ordinary is going on here. I believe it is God who is calling you... so go and lie down; and if he calls you again, you shall say, “Speak, Lord for your servant is listening.” (3:9) So Samuel went back and laid down in his usual place. And the Lord did call again, speaking to Samuel. He said, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.” (3:11)

I don’t know if Samuel meditated, but I bet he prayed a lot. In the middle of the night, he heard a voice calling his name. It made his ears tingle. In fact, I’m betting Samuel got that tingling sensation all over his body, because God was calling him, and was about to change his life. As the scene in the temple concludes, the writer adds these words to describe Samuel. He writes: “As Samuel grew up, God was with him, and let none of his words fall to the ground.”

What a wonderful thing to say of your life – “that God let none of your words fall to the ground in vain.” That ought to be every preacher’s prayer. That ought to be every Christian’s prayer. For Samuel, it was the beginning of a new phase in his life. He went forward with a strong sense of God’s calling . . . a new identity . . . and a new purpose and meaning for his life. God used Samuel to accomplish great things. He was a great prophet for Israel, and a great man of faith. It all started for Samuel when he heard God calling his name.

God knows our name, and so much more. God knows our dark side as well as the outside face we present to the world. God knows our failures and our dreams; our prejudices and our passions, our excuses and our desires. The Holy One knows us better than we know ourselves. God thinks our name is a beautiful name, and when the Holy One calls your name, it is not in judgment, but with unconditional love, and a genuine desire to fill you with grace and power.

What does it all mean for us today? Today God is calling your name, just like Samuel's name, and a whole host of others. God calls us by name so we may call others to a life of grace and love. I used to like to ask my Sessions and congregations this question: "Who do you think is the most important person in the church?" There was usually a lot of silence. They didn't know what to say.

Well, it's not the pastor, it's not the Session members, the Deacons, the musician, the staff, or anybody else. I always thought the most important person in the church is the next visitor who walks through the doors searching for God, and looking for a community of faith. Jesus said, "Whenever you welcome the stranger, you welcome me." The book of Hebrews encourages us to practice hospitality, for in doing so we are entertaining angels unaware to us.

God is calling your name so you may call others by name . . . inviting them to God's unconditional love and grace – just like someone once did for you. Who was it that invited you or first welcomed you in this church? Who was it that made you feel like you belonged and were cared for?

Many years ago as a young seminarian at McCormick Seminary in Chicago, I had the good fortune to stumble upon Lake View Presbyterian Church, just a few blocks down from Wrigley Field on Chicago's north side. It was a church unlike any other I have ever encountered. It was a More Light Church early on in the 1970's. It was a Sanctuary Church that welcomed Central American refugees.

It was a church where homeless people could be found sleeping in the church when few could survive the harsh Chicago winters. As a young seminarian searching for a place to belong, and trying to discern God's call, it was an amazing place.

Upon entering that first Sunday, a young man by the name of Norm greeted me at the door. His welcome was genuine, and while we were talking, several other people came up and extended their welcome as well. I didn't know at the time that my life was about to be changed, and that a call to ministry would emerge as a result of Lakeview Presbyterian Church.

On that first Sunday, someone invited me to sit with them, and after the service, someone else made sure that I was introduced to the pastor. Before leaving, someone else said that there would be a pot-luck dinner and a theological discussion group at their house during the week, and I would be welcome to attend. They would even pick me up.

Systematic . . . intentional . . . welcoming . . . they had a plan for visitors. The entire congregation created a climate of awareness and intentionality about what it means to invite, greet, and

welcome visitors, and they had an assimilation process that integrated new people into the life of the church.

If it wasn't for that greeter at the door over 50 years ago, making me feel welcome, I may not have experienced a call to ministry, or be here speaking to you today. It all started because someone called me by name, and welcomed me into the church.

It was no coincidence that over the course of my ministry, Cynthia and I were the Co-Organizing Pastors to start two new church developments, including Peace Presbyterian Church in Elk Grove, just south of Sacramento. On Christmas Eve in 1995, our first service was held on Christmas Eve, and over 150 new people came to that first service. Many of them had never been to church before. Others had not been for a very long time. It was amazing to stand at the door that night, and welcome people to church for the first time. During my forty years as a pastor, a main theme of my ministry was visitor outreach and new member development.

When God calls your name, it is no accident. When someone in the church reaches out to you, calling you by name, it is no accident. When God provides a purpose and plan for your life, it is no accident. When you invite someone to this church, or you welcome a stranger, make sure it is no accident. Have a plan. Have a purpose. Just as God called Samuel, God calls your name. Can you hear it?

Perhaps contemplative prayer helps when God whispers your name. God calls you by name so that you may call others, sharing the Good News of God's love and grace. You can never repay God for the many blessings you have received, but you can pass it on. I cannot repay Lakeview Presbyterian Church in Chicago for all they have given to me, but I can pass it on, and somehow I imagine that is exactly what they would want. Norm was the greeter, and he spoke my name that day in Chicago, and I have never forgotten.

It wasn't too long until I volunteered to be a greeter at Lakeview, and welcome others as they entered the door, just as I had been welcomed. During Greeter training, someone gave me a copy of a poem that was the cornerstone of why they did what they did in welcoming others on Sunday mornings, and don't you know, I kept a copy of that poem for many years.

The poem was written by Samuel Moore Shoemaker, preacher and founder of AA, and it was entitled, "I Stand By the Door." You heard a portion of it read earlier. He writes:

I stand by the door.  
 I neither go too far in, nor stay too far out.  
 The door is the most important door in the world --  
 It is the door through which people walk when they find God.  
 Nothing else matters compared to helping them find it,  
 So I stand by the door.

We are fortunate here to have a number of people who are very intentional about standing at the door to welcome people as they come to church – Susan and Jim and others of you have stood by

the door and welcomed others as they come to church, especially on the lookout for first time visitors.

It is holy work. It is important work. The future depends on it. In ten years, there will be leaders in this church who are not here yet today. How will you invite them? How will you welcome them? How will you integrate them into the life of the church?

I love the ninety-nine sheep who are already here. But I really love the one who is not here yet, whose presence is yet to be reveal, because I used to be one of them, and Lakeview Presbyterian Church took me in. I never forgot it. Once you're welcomed and accepted, you never get over it, but you can make it possible for another to belong.

Over the last few years, the Covid lockdown created an epidemic of loneliness and isolation, and many people have never recovered. That's where you and this church come in. Do you know anybody who is not here today, who could use a little good news and hope in their lives? Maybe a neighbor or friend? You could be the one who opens the door for them, and helps them to feel connected. We welcome and accept everyone here, and there might be people who come to this church who have never had that experience.

Today we also have the opportunity to reach people through live streaming, some who may not be able to come to church, and others who are viewing this service from another town or state. That's one of the lessons we learned coming out of Covid. There is a real hunger out there for friendship, meaning, support, and to be a part of a caring faith community, and you can help create it. Jesus said, "I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and they with me."

There are people for whom the only image of the divine they will ever see is the one they see reflected in you. Sometimes God will use a voice that sounds strangely like your own. Sometimes people hear God whispering their name at Centering Prayer here on Wednesday mornings. Sometimes people hear God calling their name through the Deacon's ministry during a time of need. God may whisper your name during Soul Song, or calling you to go and serve on a PDA trip. God calls others who may be searching for a church to come to a place such as this that welcomes all of God's people, welcoming everybody, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or religious background. At a time in our country when there is a lot of name-calling, God calls our name in a different way. God calls you by name in warm, inviting tones that maybe only you can hear.

What will you do? How will you respond? Sometimes I hear people say, "What can I do? I am only one person." I tell them they can start by going to church, because they can become part of an amazing community that is larger than themselves, who can work together in solidarity for human rights and social justice.

When you become a part of this congregation, there is strength in numbers, and you don't have to feel alone or powerless. The Golden State Warriors had T-shirts a couple years ago that said, "Strength in Numbers." Do you remember that? That's not just true in basketball, it's true in our church as well.

There is strength in numbers here, and it makes a difference for God and others. These are incredibly challenging times, but I think they are incredibly hope-filled times as well. You can make a difference. We can make a difference.

God call us – one by one. Listen for your name. Know that you are loved. Know that you are accepted. Know that you belong. And know you can make a difference in the lives of others who are longing to feel the same. Amen.