

Called By Name

I Samuel 3:1-10

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Now the boy Samuel was ministering to God 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, where the ark of God was.

Then the Holy One 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 Holy One 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 Holy One 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 God was calling the boy.

Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if the Holy One calls you, you shall say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" "So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now God came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

I Samuel 3:1-10

In the Christian church liturgical calendar, the seasons begin with Advent, then Christmas and then Epiphany. In this season of Epiphany, we seek to be attentive divine revelation in its many manifestations. The Holy One is present in every quest for truth and healing. God is working for wholeness in every yearning for wholeness and joy.

In the Christian household, our congregation is part of the Reformed Protestant branch of Presbyterians. We are a rationally-oriented denomination and are historically less aware of and even skeptical of mystical experiences, including hearing the voice of God. This is despite the fact that all the great religions began with experiencing the presence of the Holy, Divine Mystery, God. Our congregation seeks to invite people to develop contemplative practices and spiritual practices that help keep us open to mystical experiences and a deep sense of Sacred Presence.

Today's scripture focus on listening for the voice of God. God is constantly speaking in our lives through silence, insights, encounters, synchronous events, hunches, dreams, bursts of energy, and inspirational thoughts. Our calling is to listen to the many ways the Holy One speaks to us, calls to us, in often hidden in everyday experience. And then follow God's guidance, shaping

our encounters with God in our own unique ways.

God's creative presence in our lives is related to being deeply known. This is central to the reading from Psalm 139. "You have searched me and known me," the Psalmist prays. We are known completely by God. God's knowledge is grounded in love, God's awareness and God's creativity are one graceful movement. God has moved through our lives at the cellular and spiritual levels. Nothing is too small or large for divine awareness and activity. To be known by God is to discover oneself as loved by God.

A child dedicated to God, young Samuel hears a voice in the night. A little groggy from waking up suddenly, he assumes that it's the voice of his mentor, the priest Eli. Eli, however, tells Samuel to listen for another's voice, the voice of the Holy One of Israel. The third time Samuel hears the voice whispering in the darkness, Samuel responds, "Speak, God, your servant is listening." Samuel's response serves as a model for our own spiritual formation. In the midst of our busyness and self-interest, we take time for silence, for worship. Our prayers and meditations may be an experience of being open and attentive, quiet other voices and distractions that we may listen God's whisperings in our lives. We need our willingness to pause and be still to heighten our awareness of divine wisdom.

Samuel goes back to his sleep. God calls out "Samuel" one more time. Samuel follows instructions: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening!" Samuel hears God's voice and the incident turned him into a prophet. God can call any of us by a name that reaches all the way down to our souls, a place that even we do not know, and our journey is to grow into it. Samuel is called by God to the vocation of being a prophet to the people which will take courage.

The word vocation stems from the Latin 'vocare', meaning to call. The whole idea of vocation as a calling from God rings throughout the Scriptures. In the New Testament, the Greek word 'kalein' means 'to call'. It has four elements that express the variety and richness of God's calling.

The most common use of 'kalein' is to call a person by name. In Matthew 1:21 the angel of the Lord tells Joseph that they are to call their son 'Jesus'. In the Hebrew scriptures, 1 Samuel 3 when God calls Samuel, he addresses him by name: "Then the Lord called, 'Samuel, Samuel'". God's call is to a personal relationship. God's call is personal.

Another use of the word 'kalein' is to invite a person to a meal or celebration. It is used in the Parable of the Banquet (Matthew 22:3) for inviting the guests to the wedding feast. It is the word Luke uses to describe how to behave when invited to a wedding banquet. Being called by God means: being invited and welcomed to enjoy God's hospitality and friendship. It is a call that has nothing to do with our achievements or merits; it is solely about the loving kindness of God. It is a gift. God calls us to celebrate.

Kalein is also used to indicate that a person is summoned to a role or an honour. Paul regarded himself as called to the office of an apostle. (Romans 1: 1)

In the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14) the servants are called to take care of the owner's property. Being called by God means: being called to a task, a service in the world. God calls us to action.

God's call is personal, a call to celebrate because we are invited, a call to a role, a call to action.

God called Samuel by name and called him to be a prophet. It took courage and faith to respond and grow into the calling.

Names can shape who we are. Sometimes people change their names because the old name no longer fits. It depends who is speaking our name. Think about a time your name was spoken in love. Think about a time your name was spoken in anger. Sometimes our names are mispronounced.

Sometimes our names change over the course of our lives. I recently had a birthday. I realized that many birthday wishes came from people I knew growing up. They all call me "Cindy." At the end of seminary and as I started serving churches, I chose to be called Cynthia. That is my name now. I answer to both.

Being called by God is more than being called by our usual name. What if our true name was Beloved? And the Divine Mystery calls us Beloved and calls into a life of opening, of sharing, of compassion, of healing, of transformation.

"Go, lie down," Eli tells the young Samuel; "and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

God who pervades all of creation, down to our very cells, offers a spacious hospitality that calls to us but does not confine us; that continually invites but will not force us; that simply asks us to see and hear and know the One who is ever in our midst and in our own selves. We are called, we are deeply known, we are invited in to wholeness, invited into relationship with the Holy and one another.

This week, this day, how are you listening? Where are you looking? What holy space are you making for God in yourself? How are you opening yourself to the God who wants to know and be known by you? Maybe God is trying to tell you something.

I want to close with one of my favorite images of that. It is a scene in Alice Walker's book *The Color Purple* which was made into a movie.

Traveling blues singer Shug Avery has been estranged from her pastor father for decades, because of her decision to sing secular music. One morning, while she's visiting her hometown, she decides that she feels like singing. She opens the local "juke joint" and begins singing her signature song. As a crowd gathers around the singer, the scene cuts to her father's church. As he is preaching, sounds from the juke joint drift in through the open windows. Someone in the congregation prompts the choir to begin singing "Maybe God Is Trying to Tell You Something."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-BfHlRvtlw&ab_channel=KAKAU99-MeuCrochett

Shug walks up to her father and puts her arms around him. She whispers, "See, daddy, even sinners have soul." He returns her embrace as tears fill her eyes. That embrace, that reconciliation. That is part of hearing the voice of the Divine.

A call for being truthful with ourselves.

A call for bridges that can be built over time in many relationships, in our community,
in our country.

A call to humility and hope and reconciliation.

We are called by name,

we are called Beloved,

we are invited to live into the Beloved Community as we travel home. Amen.