

Called? Me?

January 15, 2012

1 Samuel 3:1–10 (11–20)

As you have no doubt noticed over the years, I don't often use the Old Testament lesson as the sermon text. Nothing against the Hebrew Bible – in fact it has much to teach us. But I tend to focus on the gospel readings, which in turn focus on Jesus the Christ, whom we proclaim and follow as Lord.

But as I was studying today's Old Testament reading, it struck me that there were some things there that I wanted to share with you. As always, give credit to the Holy Spirit for the inspiration.

According to an old saying, you just can't send a boy to do a man's work. Or can you? God seemed to do just that. In fact, if one were to review God's choices of prophets and leaders in the scriptures, God seemed to make many curious choices.

Consider Jacob, Moses, David, Jonah, Jeremiah, Mary, Paul. And in today's lesson we learn about Samuel.

It is a dark time in the history of God's people. We read that "The word of the Lord was rare in those days" (1 Sam 3:1). Eli is getting old and feeble. His sons are pathetic failures, even blasphemers of God.

So who rides in to save the day? Young Samuel. What do we know of Samuel prior to God's call? We know he has a faithful mother, Hannah. Truly, it is Hannah's faith that places Samuel in the care of the priest Eli.

We know his mother faithfully visits him year in and year out. We know that Samuel is growing in stature and favor with God and with the people. But that's it. That is his entire resume.

And this is the one who will deliver a message to the people so stunning that it "will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle" (v. 11).

How old is Samuel? An ancient historian places him at about 12 years of age. Quite evidently Samuel is not used to hearing the voice of God. Would it otherwise have taken four tries and a suggestion from an old priest to get the communication started between Samuel and God?

On the other hand, maybe the old priest isn't accustomed to God's voice, either, if it takes him three tries to set Samuel on the right path.

"Samuel, Samuel," the call goes out. "Here I am," responds Samuel, but to Eli, not to the one who calls.

"Samuel," the call goes out. "Here I am," responds Samuel a second time to Eli, and a second time incorrectly.

The call goes out for the third time, and Samuel responds, “Here I am.” Samuel is consistent in his willingness to serve. But Samuel is still addressing the wrong party.

After the third misadventure, Eli instructs the boy, if called again, to answer, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (v. 9).

Sure enough, the call comes a fourth time, “Samuel, Samuel!” And the line of communication between God and Samuel is opened as Samuel responds, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

As it happens, Samuel listens to a hard message, especially hard for his beloved Eli, whose family will be punished for their iniquity.

In the morning Eli asks about the message from God, but Samuel is reluctant to speak the message for fear it will hurt Eli. Eli persists, and Samuel tells it all – his first exercise at telling the truth of God, no matter how discomfiting.

Imagine, a 12-year-old boy delivering a word of judgment to a long-standing priest.

And what of today? Is God still choosing people who seem unlikely to be chosen – people who are young, who can’t speak well, who seem even hostile to the Word? Is God calling you?

Recall our Gospel lesson for today in which Jesus is calling disciples. When we take a look at that group, there is nothing spectacular about them. We know that there are fishermen, a tax collector – quite ordinary people.

You would think that if Jesus wanted to get something done in a hurry, he would have picked some priests and scribes and lawyers. Maybe Jesus would have included a Roman governor or even an emperor into his group of close disciples. But, no, Jesus seems satisfied to call quite ordinary people.

Most of us here this morning are quite ordinary. Certainly I include myself in that category. And I definitely don’t mean that as any sort of put-down. And there well may be that there could be someone who is quite extraordinary among us.

Who knows – Lauren Walker, with her soccer, may be the next Mia Hamm. But, at least as far as I know, we don’t have any billionaires, past or future Olympians, a politician who can touch the lives of thousands, or the best cardiac surgeon in the world among our members..

Surely such people do sit among the people of God. But most of us claim no great place in history. We do our jobs, we raise our families, we care for our homes, we go to school – whatever it is that takes us through the week.

And God is calling us. God is calling us or we wouldn’t be here today!

When God calls, we tend to be like Samuel and do not hear God's voice correctly. Or we may make excuses like Moses and Jeremiah. Or we may be contrary to the call like Jonah. Yet God calls and calls and calls.

Let's go back to our Old Testament reading. The first chapters of 1 Samuel not only tell us about Samuel they also tell us about the spiritual conditions among God's people at that time.

As I noted earlier, the Israelites were hitting an all time low in their idolatry and immorality. They could barely be recognized as the Lord's people. Even some of the priests, especially the two sons of the high priest, Eli, were openly ignoring God's commands and living immoral lives.

After being told that Samuel, the future prophet, was serving at God's house we are given another important piece of background information. "In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions." Because God's people were not listening to Him He stopped talking to them!

But all that was about to change. God would use Samuel to open the ears of His people. "Listen to the Lord," would be Samuel's message. And he himself would be a living example of how that is done. Samuel listened to the Lord with the ears of a servant and the actions of a servant.

At that time God's people certainly didn't have the ears of a servant. Their ears were deaf to God's Word and closed to his commands. In direct contradiction to the First Commandment the Israelites worshipped idols.

Although they kept up some of the outward signs of religion and of belonging to the Lord their hearts and lives were filled with sin.

The book of Judges outlines the spiral of unbelief and wickedness down which the Israelites slid in each generation.

And it wasn't as though God didn't try to get his people to repent. Again and again he raised up spiritual leaders who attempted to lead the Israelites to repent of their sins and change their ways. They refused to listen.

But there was one who did listen. As our lesson tells us, God called Samuel three times, and each time Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Certainly Samuel had the ears of a servant.

Three times he went to Eli thinking that Eli had called him. Samuel doesn't ignore the voice and go back to sleep. He doesn't say, "Well, I already went in there twice. Let the old man get what he needs himself!" Samuel didn't tune Eli out or pull a pillow over his head and ignore the voice he heard.

Sometimes when we read a section of Scripture it is easy to see the point that God is making. Do you see it here? At first it might seem like we have a lot of unnecessary details in this account.

But through this short story we have a powerful lesson. Those who would listen to the Lord must listen like Samuel—with the ears of a servant.

So let's ask the question. What kind of ears do we have when it comes to listening to the Lord? When God calls are we ready to jump at a moment's notice? Do we say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening"? Or have we begun to say, "Listen, Lord, your servant is speaking"?

The action of listening to someone is often an expression of love and respect for that person. We know, or if we don't we soon learn, that love can't be forced or demanded from someone. It is a response freely given.

So too, listening can't be forced or demanded from someone either. Even if I tied you to your pew I couldn't force you to listen to me. If you didn't want to listen you could still ignore me even if the sound of my voice were forced into your ears.

So in order to give us the ears of a servant God first extends his love to us. He breaks the bonds of sin that bind us. Through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus he redeems us—he buys us back—from slavery to sin. Now we have every reason to be attentive to what he has to say.

It is in a response of love that we now say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening"

Having the ears of a servant also implies that we are willing to listen closely and carefully to the Lord. We don't assume that we know what he says. Even if we have read the Bible many times and studied it often, with the ears of a servant we gladly listen to God once again.

I heard about a minister who was visiting the home of some one of his members. The lady of the house was trying to impress her pastor about how devout she was by pointing out the large Bible on the bookshelf and talking in a very reverential way of it as "the Word of God."

Her young son interrupted the conversation and said, "Well, if that's God's book we better send it back to him because we never read it!" Having the ears of a servant is one thing but actually using them to listen to God is quite another.

But again back to our scripture lesson. God wasn't calling to Samuel just to see if he was listening. He had work for Samuel to do. And when the Lord called Samuel he went into action.

The first twenty-four chapters of 1 Samuel record the actions of Samuel as a servant of the Lord. He led the armies of Israel. He became a circuit-riding judge for his people. When he was an old man he anointed Saul as the first king of Israel. Later he anointed David as king. All his years he faithfully listened to the LORD with the actions of a servant.

So then what is the secret behind listening to the Lord with the actions of a servant? There really is no secret to it. To listen to the Lord with the actions of a servant we only need to return to our relationship with him.

Remember that before God even gave the commandments he reminded his people of who they were and what he had done for them.

He said, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." (Exodus 20:2) Then he went on to give the commandments. For us to put God's Word into practice we need that same reminder.

God gets our attention by saying, "I am the Lord your God. I freed you from sin through my Son. I have given you a get of hell free card because I let my Son suffer it in your place."

Now it is very unlikely that God will wake us up in the middle of the night and entrust us with some special mission. No, for most of us we are called upon to serve the Lord in much more mundane ways. By putting him first in our lives we are ready to serve the Lord.

If you are a husband the Lord asks you to serve him by loving your wife. If you are a wife the Lord asks you to show the actions of service to him by loving your husband.

Children are called to serve the Lord by obeying their parents and others in authority. Fathers and mothers are entrusted with the work of caring for their children and teaching them to also listen to the Lord

As an employee God calls us to do our job as if he himself was our boss.

Every day we run into people who need an encouraging word, a smile, and a simple act of friendship. All these things may not sound like great and noble tasks.

No, God hasn't asked us to lead an army, serve as a judge, or anoint someone king, such as Samuel did. But our carrying out of the every day tasks of life to his glory is the job the Lord has given us.

But we sell God short when we think that he has only asked us to do ordinary things for him. He has given us the great mission of sharing the gospel. To each of us some great gift of the Holy Spirit has been given for us to use in service to others.

Has God been calling you to get into action as his servant? You know if he has. Listen to the Lord with the actions of a servant.

God has been calling ordinary people for thousands of years. Who is it that teaches in our Sunday school, leads the women's groups, serves on the session? Who visits or calls or sends cards to people whose lives have been touched by illness or misfortune, or to someone who is comforted to know that others remember?

Regular, ordinary people whom the Spirit calls and equips do those things.

Aren't we all rather ordinary? And do we not often have a tendency to dismiss ourselves from consideration because we are nothing special?

Each one of us is special in the eyes of God. We are called in baptism to let our lights shine. One is never too young or old or rich or poor or too anything to serve God. Listen, listen: God is calling. He's calling me – and he's calling you.

May we all, like Samuel, answer, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."