



When God Calls Your Name...

1 Samuel 3:1-20

January 15, 2006

All my messages this month are about the voice of God. Last Sunday we heard the voice of God through the thunderstorm of Psalm 29. Today, the voice of God gets more personal, as the boy Samuel hears God call his name. When I was a boy and heard this story of Samuel, what I heard was a simple story about God talking to a boy, who obediently responded, "Speak for thy servant heareth." And our Sunday School teacher would tell us, "Now that is what you all must do whenever you hear God calling you." In fact one boy, when he heard the story of Samuel, asked, "When is God going to call me?" Isn't that cute. All in all, I always thought the story was a simple child's story.

But now when I read this 3rd chapter of Samuel, it is a very adult story, full of mixed feelings and irony and sadness along with the excitement. Now I can read it from the point of view of old Eli as well as young Samuel. Now I see that this is a story in which someone gets the call of the Lord, but someone else loses the call of the Lord.

(Read 1 Samuel 3:1-20)

THIS IS A STORY ABOUT BEING OLD, ABOUT BEING YOUNG, AND ABOUT BEING GOD.

FIRST, IT'S A STORY ABOUT BEING OLD. The prophet Eli was getting old. Not only was he old in years, but the ministry had become old for him too. Eli the prophet was either burning out or rusting out or both.

One proof of this was his two scoundrel sons, Hophni and Phineas. They helped their dad with worship at the house of the Lord in Shiloh, but they were really in the ministry for themselves. They were not satisfied with their normal compensation, but stole from the offerings. They could not control themselves around the women who came to the shrine, but sexually abused them. They sound like some of the stories we read today about wayward priests and preachers.

All of this was proof that Eli just didn't have the same spark for God's work that he used to have. In his younger days he would never have put up with such nonsense from anyone, least of all his sons. But now, old rusted-out/burned-out Eli just let them carry on, just let it all slide.

It was no coincidence that “word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” Eli’s vision was growing dim in more ways than one. Eli used to be the seer of God’s Word ... USED to be.

Eli was slipping into one of the seven deadly sins that the desert fathers of early Christian history called: acedia. They called acedia “the devil of the noon day sun.” That is, in the heat of Christian service, one’s spirit may wilt. Acedia is spiritual boredom, spiritual indifference. (*Urban T. Holmes III in Spirituality for Ministry, quoted in A Guide to Prayer for Ministers & Other Servants, p. 63, The Upper Room, 1983.*)

Not too long ago there was a Baptist pastor and writer named Carlyle Marney who was often invited to seminaries to tell young aspiring ministers what they could expect when they got out of school and into the church. He would ask those students: “Ten years from now, after ten years of church work, will you still love Jesus, or will you have become hand tamed by church work?” It’s an occupational hazard of the ministry: to lose all excitement for the spiritual quest. That’s what happened to Eli. He let himself get old in more ways than one. Sometimes even young people in their teens and twenties let themselves get old. When’s the last time you’ve heard someone give up and stop caring and say, “whatever...”? The story of Eli and Samuel is a story about being old.

AND IT IS ALSO A STORY ABOUT BEING YOUNG. Samuel was maybe the age of a middle schooler, say 13 or so. He was there in the house of the Lord as a sort of prophet’s apprentice to Eli. How he got there is another great story, but today I’ll just say that his mother had made a deal with God when she was barren, saying, “If you’ll give me a baby, I’ll give him back to you,” and so she did, and delivered the toddler to the worship center at Shiloh to an astounded Eli.

I don’t expect old Eli was pleased to have to care for a toddler, but over time the kid grew on him. And the boy did turn out to be pretty good help. In fact, Samuel became to Eli the devout son he’d never had, especially compared to his own out-of-control sons. They made an odd pair, this rusted-out old prophet who had gone so long without hearing a Word from the Lord, and this eager boy who was excited to help the great Eli the prophet.

Then came that night, when all were asleep: the boy Samuel snoozing by the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies; the prophet Eli in another room nearby. And in the dark the boy hears, “Samuel! Samuel!” He runs to Eli: “Here I am.” The old prophet mumbles sleepily: “I didn’t call. Lie back down.” This happens a couple more times, and then the old prophet perceives Who has been calling.

It’s a bittersweet moment. It’s a moment of awesome joy, for the long silent Voice of the Lord has come back. And to his credit, Eli still has enough spiritual perception to realize this. And it is a sad moment, for Eli realizes that the Voice that by all rights should have come to Eli has come to this boy instead. But the once great prophet puts his disappointment aside and gives his apprentice one more lesson: “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’”

And that's how it happened. The old burned-out prophet lies back down knowing that God has passed him over. The young boy lies back down, and hears the Voice of God. God tells Samuel that the Lord will not put up with what Eli's sons have been doing. The family of Eli will not be a family of prophets much longer. God is revoking his call to Eli. God is giving the call to Samuel.

It is a sad moment when you realize that your hero and mentor is only human. When Harry Potter sees Prof. Dumbledore lose his cool. When you see your father grimace in pain because he's not as strong as before. When you realize your grandfather is prejudiced. But that is part of growing up. Samuel lies back down, but his eyes are wide open through the rest of the night. How can he tell his teacher that Eli and his sons will lose everything?

At last morning comes. Old Eli rises and is desperate to hear what the Lord has told Samuel. Now the roles are reversed: the teacher is now the student; the leader is now led. Samuel tells him everything. And Eli says "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

This story is about being old, and being young. For Eli, being old means that he has lost his passion, his zeal for God. And now he has lost his call from God. For Samuel, being young means that the torch of prophecy will soon pass to him, for he is full of passion and eagerness for the Lord. He will be a faithful priest. The Lord will be with him, and will "Let none of his words fall to the ground," that is, none of Samuel's words will be wasted. And for Samuel, being young means experiencing that first-time thrill of sensing that you are in the Presence of Something far greater than you, Someone who wants to be with you, Someone who calls your name, Someone who has a path laid out for your life, Someone who has something great for you to do.

Notice that the difference between being old and being young before God is not a matter of years, but a matter of openness and passion and obedience.

BEING GOD

This story is about being old, and about being young, and it is also about being God. We learn some things about God from this. As God deals with Eli, we learn that human behavior leads to divine consequences. God is a God of grace AND judgment. So God's word to Eli is a word of "un-calling."

We learn something about the being of God from how God deals with Samuel. God is a God who comes to us, seeks us out, finds us, and then calls us by name. God does not remain far off, but rather gets involved in the specifics of our untidy lives. And God calls us, addresses us. Karl Barth once said all of human history begins in being addressed. In other words, before God called us, we were nowhere. But God calls us by name again and again, and so here we are, on the edge of the future God has for us.

One more thing we learn about God. God is a God who chooses to work through people -- not just great kings and priests, but also broken people, weak people, little people, young people. Like Samuel. And God does not call only middle school age boys. God calls boys and girls, and men and women, and old folks too. One of the greatest Baptist Men testimonies I've ever heard was by a old man named George Britton who declared up front, "God has no retirement plan!"

How does God call us? Sometimes just as God called Samuel, in the middle of the night, with a voice, maybe audible, maybe not. God also calls us through the gifts and talents we have, calling us to put our gifts to work. Frederick Buechner says "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 95)

Where and when might God call us? Often God calls people at odd times and in odd places: Samuel on the floor of a sanctuary, Moses by a burning bush, Paul on the road to Damascus, Martin Luther on a road in the middle of a lightning storm. (*William Powell Tuck, Lectionary Homiletics, Jan. 2006, p. 61*) You just never know how God might get your attention next.

There is one call that God makes on every one. That is the call to follow him. We hear this call through his Son Jesus. Around the world this Sunday, many Christians are reading from the gospel of John of the call Jesus made to Philip and Nathanel (John 1.43ff): "Follow me." That is indeed the basic call, that is, the voice of God that is whispered to all of us, in the middle of the night, in the middle of the day. Follow me. Let me take care of your past with my forgiveness. And then let me take care of your future with my leadership in your life. Follow me.

Remember that boy who heard the story of God calling Samuel for the first time, who said, "When is God going to call me?" There are people in this room whose names I believe God is calling right now, "Follow me." Who among you hears that today? Who among you will reply, "Speak Lord, for your servant is waiting"?

-- Douglas E. Murray