

**June 3, 2018**

**I Samuel 3: 1-20**

**Prayer: Dear God, please enter our minds and our hearts as we study your word.**

**Without your Holy Spirit, we can so easily go wrong in our interpretation. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.**

### **Callings**

The question I get asked as much as any is, *How do I know what God wants me to do with my life?*

Or variations of the same question: *I feel that God is telling me to do X, but I don't know how to start.*

*God called me when I was young, and I've been running ever since. How do you really know?*

I am sympathetic. As I have said before, I entered seminary because I had accepted the religion beat at *The Greenville News*. I wanted to understand more of what I was writing about.

Then I got into my very first class on the New Testament. And I thought, *Whoa! This is fascinating*. And I literally spent the next three years trying to ascertain if God was calling me into ministry.

Being a reporter, I thought I'd ask the experts. And so I did a huge 2-page piece, asking pastors and rabbis how they heard the voice of God. How they *knew* they were called into ministry. Tandy was actually in that story.

Their answers ranged from hearing an audible voice ... to being totally unsure and simply stepping out in faith. The ones that resonated most with me said they seldom knew at the time, but could often see God's movement in hindsight.

It's a question that most Christians ask themselves at one time or another. *Does God care what I do career-wise -- as long as it's not drug running? Or is it more a matter of how I live regardless of my setting, regardless of my career path? Can we bloom where we're planted regardless of vocation?*

Seventeen years ago, the Lilly Endowment began handing out million-dollar grants to colleges that were willing to explore those questions. That is – how do our views and feelings about God impact our choice of career?

Furman University received \$2 million, and our own Elaine Nocks was one of the faculty members who founded what is now the Cothran Center for Vocational Reflection.

She and her colleagues put in place reading groups and speakers and panels and mission trips all designed to encourage students and faculty and even alumni to explore their views of God and religion. To explore how those views colored their career choices.

In fact, each summer the Cothran Center brings incoming freshmen to visit Triune as part of introducing them to Greenville's religious scene. They'll be here on June 24.

Obviously, the trustees of the Lilly Endowment think religion is important in the lives of citizens. Since 2000, they have given hundreds of millions of dollars to schools to do this kind of reflective work.

In all of those universities, including Furman, students are encouraged to think about call.

*Is God calling them to ministry?*

*Is God calling them into environmental sustainability work?*

*Is God calling them into marriage or parenthood, into teaching or sports or music or medicine?*

*Are those even the right questions?*

*Does God really care what I do, or is that a construct we have built all by ourselves and then named God?* I think Kate Bowler, the Duke Divinity professor whom I talked about on Mother's Day might say the latter.

We come honestly by the notion that God calls us. Because in the Bible, God called people right and left. He sent angels and voices and storms and big fish. In a moment, we're going to read about the call of the prophet Samuel. In this story, a call seems so pure. So open and shut.

God speaks in an audible voice. And his child responds.

But first let me set the stage. In the Old Testament, you don't get much more action and adventure than in the two books of Samuel. The books bridge that time in history when Israel was ruled by judges to the time it was ruled by kings.

I Samuel begins with the miraculous birth of Samuel and goes through the rise and fall of King Saul and King David.

The books are chock full of love affairs and war, of deception and murder, of kings and witches. A virtual *Game of Thrones*.

As the books begin, there was no permanent temple. The priest Eli resided in the tent that housed the Ark of the Covenant at Shiloh.

Eli was a godly man, but his sons Hophni and Phineas were evil. They stole meat sacrifices that people brought. They slept with temple prostitutes. The NRSV translation calls them “scoundrels.”

And their father did nothing to stop them.

Into this temple comes the barren woman, Hannah, grieving because she has been unable to conceive. She implores God for a child. When God blesses her with one, she weans the child and hands him back over to serve the Lord. So as a child, the young Samuel lives in the temple with the elderly priest Eli.

Thus the stage is set. An old, corrupt priesthood is on the way out. A new and hopeful regime, represented by a true prophet of the Lord, is on the way in.

Please turn to **I Samuel 3: 1-20**, and let’s see what happens next.

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>12</sup>On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. <sup>13</sup>For I have told him that I am about to punish his house for ever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. <sup>14</sup>Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering for ever.'

15 Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli.

<sup>16</sup>But Eli called Samuel and said, 'Samuel, my son.' He said, 'Here I am.'

<sup>17</sup>Eli said, 'What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.'

<sup>18</sup>So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, 'It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him.'

19 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.

The child Samuel does not recognize the voice of the Lord. He thinks it's his mentor, Eli, calling him.

It takes four times before Samuel understands that the voice is the Lord's. And he understands then only because Eli tells him.

*He understands then only because Eli tells him.*

I know that Samuel is a child, but I think more than childish misunderstanding is going on here. We often hear God in community, in the voices of trusted people.

That is why we ordain pastors. That is why I can't simply announce that I'm a pastor and walk into a church and commence to preaching, as Jethro Clampett would say.

Our communities of faith ordain us. They watch us, they watch our lives, and they help us determine if a calling is indeed of God, or if it is of our own making.

To me, one of our most sacred moments here was when we ordained Karen Eller as our associate pastor. It was clear to us that she was a godly woman, and well suited for the Lord's work.

Obviously, the process is not foolproof. So-called preachers get ordination certificates off the Internet. Television evangelists persuade people of their sincerity and then rip people off.

But at its heart, ordination is a community decision, a community discernment of God's call. At its best, a community of faith can help you discern if you are properly hearing a call.

In my case, I was well into seminary, but completely and totally confused about what I was doing there. And then one Sunday I visited Augusta Road Baptist Church to hear my friend Toni Pate preach on this passage about little Samuel. That afternoon, I decided to leave the newspaper, change my degree program to a master of divinity, and go into ministry.

I did not try to persuade the people of First Baptist Greenville, my home church, that this was a good idea. Instead, I asked them repeatedly, "Can this possibly be right? Is there any way I'm hearing this correctly?"

Part of me wanted them to say, "Girl, you are tripping. Go back to the newspaper."

How I envy Samuel! How marvelous to hear God audibly and with certainty! How wonderful to know you are where God wants you to be!

Unfortunately, it's anything but clear for most of us.

After nearly 13 years in ministry....

after watching devout pastor friends accept new positions and leave within a year...

after reading about Mother Teresa who felt abandoned by God for the greatest part of her life...

I have come to a place of anti-dogmatism on this subject. If someone tells me he has a call, I am thrilled for him. I am delighted for the clarity she enjoys.

But most of us, clergy included, muddle through. If you find yourself in this confusing place of thinking you may be hearing a call, it's good to talk to trusted friends. To read Scripture. To pray. To journal. To read some of the wise people who have written about call. Parker Palmer is one whom the Cothran Center has used in the past.

Palmer is a Quaker writer and teacher who believes that as image bearers of God, our lives come with intrinsic bents toward what we should do, how we should live.

He says, "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent."

In other words, vocation is not something we should willfully choose as much as it is something we should discern by listening to who we already are. Our Quaker friends are big on listening.

The prolific writing monk Thomas Merton wrestled with this question of call throughout his life. He expressed it best in this famous prayer:

My Lord God,

I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

nor do I really know myself,

and the fact that I think I am following your will

does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you

does in fact please you.

Perhaps our highest calling is the desire to please our Lord.

Amen.