

I Samuel 3: 1-20
Psalm 139: 1-6
John 1: 43-51

Voices and Vocations
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When I was first taking seminary courses, I took one with the title, “Calling and Vocation.” It was team-taught, with a lot of different teaching voices explaining how a person of faith might find their place in this world. By chance, I had a conversation a few days ago with an educator at Geisel School of Medicine, who spoke about defining the practice of medical care as a “calling” or an “occupation.” So I have been turning over in my mind a lot of words: calling, vocation, career, job, mission. And not just as pastors or priests would understand these words, but how they are fundamental parts of our human identity.

One way to think of it is to say that “calling” is a way to refer to a voice that comes from the outside, while “vocation” is a way to refer to a voice that comes from the inside. We experience a voice, which becomes a word, which then becomes an action. And each person experiences this differently. There are the voices of parents or family members, telling us that we must succeed or how to succeed. There are the voices of advertising, telling us to be beautiful so that we can be loved. There are the voices of activists, telling us to take up one cause or another. And all these voices are amplified by the sheer number of communication modes we now experience. We have become a society addicted to quick communication and uninterrupted flows of information, a society of urgency. We cannot escape voices of demand and expectation. And - some might say unfortunately - when you come to church we also hear the voice of Scripture, with its own demands and challenges, and we struggle to interpret them for ourselves.

In the midst of all this calling and searching, how do we recognize a particular kind of voice, a different calling? This is not just a contemporary problem. In our story from the Hebrew Scriptures about the boy Samuel, we read, “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” Calls from God were rare. Samuel was probably called by others often, as a child pledged to serve in the Temple at Shiloh. Daytime, nighttime, he was probably used to human voices calling and asking and maybe teaching. So it is natural that he would assume that the voice in the night was Eli, the priest in charge. He is so sure that he hops up and runs to his mentor three times, each time saying, “Here I am, for you called me.” He was certainly a responsive and responsible child. Or just an unusually light sleeper. ☺

If we had read the preceding chapter in First Samuel, we might have a better understanding of why the word of the Lord was rare, of why visions were not widespread, of why Eli’s eyesight was described as dim. Things were not going well at the Temple in Shiloh. Old Eli’s sons were serving as priests, but they were completely corrupt, feasting on the offerings and tithes that were made by the people, engaging in sexual exploitation and blasphemy. Eli complained about it, but nothing changed. A “man of God” came and condemned it, but nothing changed. Perhaps it wasn’t that the word of the Lord was rare, but that no one wanted to listen to it or act on it. No one had the vision to see where all this was leading. They were too caught up in the static of everyday life to hear anything they didn’t want to hear.

This passage may resonate for us because many of us think that the word of the Lord is rare these days, or difficult to hear. We might even feel a bit relieved, because who wants to get a phone call in the night that wakes us up, disturbs us, and tells us that some other ways of living are possible? But the most compelling aspect of the story, to me, may be the relationship and dialogue, not between God and Samuel, but between Samuel and Eli. It is a painful exchange. It is Eli who realizes first what is going on – Eli who tells Samuel how to be open to the voice in the night – Eli who insists on hearing the prophecy – Eli who recognizes the truth of the words and does not even seem surprised. The most poignant side of this story is the tragedy of one who hears the word, but has squandered the opportunity to respond.

Our reading from Samuel is paired with another kind of voice, another kind of call in the Gospel of John. Jesus has just been baptized, and is collecting students by the Jordan River. He has already called to Andrew, Peter, and Philip. In turn, Philip calls to Nathanael to share his excitement about finding the Messiah. But Nathanael resists. He is pretty sure that the word of the Lord is rare these days, and that in any case it would not come from Nazareth. So he makes a clever little quip, a little put-down of a backwater town. But the call from God is insistent. Jesus does not respond to the jab at his hometown, but goes straight to the heart of Nathanael: He sees him and knows him. He does it with some word play of his own, naming Nathaniel as an Israelite in whom there is no guile: their ancestor Israel or Jacob, was notoriously full of guile. It's a little mysterious, but somehow Nathanael hears a divine voice speaking those words of affirmation and begins to burst with enthusiasm. You think this was special? asks Jesus. Just wait and see: more is coming. "You will see greater things than these." Heaven and earth are not so separate as you think. Jesus' call shakes Nathanael - and us - out of our complacency and our limited sight, so that we begin to see visions of the future.

So I might ask, is the word of the Lord rare in our days, or is God actually trying to get our attention? While we fritter our time away in self-absorption and belittlement of others, perhaps someone is speaking, or something is speaking, a word that will give us our vocation.

Between Christmas and New Years, I spent a few days in Washington with my children. We took my son Will to the Martin Luther King, Jr. monument – he had not yet seen it. After doing some artistic critique of the actual statue, he walked slowly along the wall, reading the 16 quotes from King's sermons and speeches that are engraved there. He was very moved, not only by their eloquence, but by how pertinent they are to today, in January 2018. When you read the words, "We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience," spoken in Montgomery in 1965, you get a kind of chill running up your spine, because it could and should be spoken with at least as much power today. You get a kind of chill up your spine, or feel a kind of warmth in your heart, which makes me wonder...is God trying to get our attention?

And maybe our attention should be caught, not only with beautiful words, but by other voices. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched alongside Martin Luther King in the civil rights movement, said, "There is immense silent agony in the world, and the task of (a hu)man is to be a voice for the plundered poor, to prevent the desecration of the soul and the violation of our dream of honesty. The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the Prophets sought to convey: that morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human

beings, that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.”

There is an African-American hymn called “Maybe God Is Trying To Tell You Something,” in which a chorus sings, “Speak, Lord,” echoing the boy Samuel’s openness to God’s voice. If we were to say or sing, “Speak, Lord,” I wonder what we would hear? We might hear a number of things. It might be one of those quotes from a civil rights speech. Or it might be the “immense silent agony in the world.” And, especially because we live in community, and we are a congregational church, it will probably be a collection of voices.

So here is where our real challenge lies: not just in discerning the vocation of each one here (though that is a crucial task for each one here) but of discerning our communal vocation. Some communities focus, hear and follow one voice, one word, and do what they do best. Others can’t cram their communities into commitment to one big mission: they will not hear one just voice. Their existing commitments to service and compassion are already too broad. In that case, vocation might be more like a piece of music, with harmonies and layering forming a coherent piece, each sound pealing forth at a different season or moment. So discerning vocation lies more in finding the pattern in the melody, the passion and compassion, the joy and the need harmonizing into a song of faithful following.

Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann enthuses about this:
"What a stunning vocation for the church, to stand free and hope-filled in a world gone fearful – and to think, imagine, dream, vision a future that God will yet enact."

On this weekend, with Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday tomorrow, I hold up to you the cause of social justice as a primary vocation of the church: a way that God’s voice from the outside and our hearts from the inside come into sync with the deep need of the world. Maybe God is trying to tell us something, today, if we listen. If you have a nagging feeling that you could be doing more for the cause of justice, if you are shaken by stories of those who are unable to speak for or defend themselves, if your rest is disturbed to the point that you realize you have more to learn and more to act upon, if you are energized by the words of the prophets, ancient and modern, then maybe something new is happening. Maybe God is trying to tell you something.

We are privileged by many things, but especially privileged by the love of God and this place of refuge. The God who searches us and knows us is raising up new prophets and disciples, even now. If you have heard God’s voice in the cries of the vulnerable, you are hearing a call to be courageous and step into the world outside these doors. You are hearing something which should make both ears of all the nation and all the world “tingle,” as we read in Samuel. Now it is up to you, to us, to become prophets and workers in the future that God will enact.

Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening. Amen