

When God calls us, do we hear? The Old Testament reading today gives us a glimpse into the call of Samuel, the great prophet who served at the time of the beginnings of the monarchy in Israel and who anointed Israel's first kings: Saul and David. The circumstances of Samuel's call are very odd. In the preceding chapter is recorded Samuel's mother, Hannah's prayer of thanksgiving in answer to her previous petition for a child. Then there is an account of the wicked behavior of the priest Eli's sons, whom the New Revised Standard Version calls "scoundrels." Now Eli the priest is portrayed all along as a father who cannot keep his sons in line, even to the extent that they are described as having "no regard for the LORD," as treating "the offerings of the LORD with contempt" by acting greedily, and as acting immorally with women. *This* priest, Eli, is the person to whom Hannah gives custody of her beloved son Samuel.

Surely Hannah had heard the rumors. Eli certainly had and he attempted to use the fact that there were rumors being spread around as a motivating factor to get his sons to stop when he confronted them. But his reproof was to no avail. Perhaps this made Hannah uneasy and perhaps she had doubts about leaving her precious child in the care of someone whose own sons were spurning the duties of priests and acting immorally. Such company does not make for the ideal environment in which to raise a child. Yet she did leave Samuel there. For when praying desperately for a son, she had made a vow to dedicate her son to the LORD as a Nazirite. A Nazirite is a person specially consecrated to God who takes a vow to avoid alcohol of any kind and never to cut his hair. Other Nazirites in the Bible include Samson the judge, of the famous long hair, and John the Baptist, our Advent saint. In order to fulfill the vow she made in her original petition, Hannah had to trust her child to God and take him to the temple to be raised by Eli. Her faithful act is rewarded, for interposed with descriptions of wickedness on the part of Eli's sons are accounts of Samuel's good stature in the sight of God. We are told three times of God's favor toward Samuel: first that "the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the LORD," then "the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and with the people," and finally "as Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground" meaning that everything Samuel told the people as a word from the LORD was confirmed by God.

Now, what of the call itself? Our text today gives the story of Samuel's call to be a messenger or prophet of the LORD. Did you notice that God calls Samuel not once, but four times? It takes persistence and patience on God's part to call Samuel because as our reading began "the word of the LORD was rare in those days" and people just weren't used to hearing anything from God. The physical condition of Eli, the fact that his "eyesight had begun to grow dim" mirrors his spiritual condition. Not only is Eli growing physically blind but he is growing spiritually blind as well! When God calls to Samuel, Eli thinks Samuel is hearing things in his sleep. He doesn't recognize the voice of the LORD.

It must have taken guts on Samuel's part to keep getting up and going to Eli when he heard the call. It must have taken courage to wake up his master again and again from what would otherwise have been a pleasant night's sleep. It must have taken faith to respond to the voice even though he had no idea who was calling or why. How often do we have to persevere, like Samuel, in pursuing our own calling even when it isn't being validated or even recognized for what it is? Maybe we're worried about being annoying or too persistent in pursuing what later seems to have been a dream, but the voice keeps on calling and we are compelled to respond.

The voice we hear need not be an audible one. From my own experience, God communicates through ideas, thoughts, even impulses. Once, after a series of seemingly coincidental occurrences, randomly choosing to attend an extra lecture which a nun happened also to be attending, who started talking to me, and who became my lecture buddy; this planted a seed that ended in me landing in a convent for two and a half months. This was certainly not something I had foreseen or planned out. Yet looking back, I can see the hand of God in the seemingly random decision to attend that lecture, a choice that is continuing to affect my life. Now, not every random thought that comes into our heads is a communication from God. Certainly, anything that goes against the teachings of scripture and the character of God should come into considerable doubt. Discernment by seeking counsel from others is certainly necessary. Yet the Word of God is manifest to us not only in the person of Jesus Christ and the scriptures. The book of nature is another source for learning about God. In Christian doctrine this is called general revelation. But God doesn't necessarily speak with a trumpet. God knows how to use his 12 inch voice. God is present and reaching out to us, if only we would open our eyes and see.

Looking at Samuel's call from a different angle, have we ever felt like Eli and not been able to see that God could call someone else? When the word of the LORD is rare do we expect God to speak to a young boy? One thing this passage illustrates is that the children and youth of the church are not the "church of tomorrow;" they are the church of today! Even a young boy or girl, of 12 or 13, the age traditionally ascribed to Samuel, can speak a prophetic word from the LORD. Have we ever thought that God doesn't speak to other types of people? To women? To persons with different colored skin? To those who are uneducated? To those who *we think* don't deserve it? Perhaps we underestimate a certain group of people because of where they live or we continue to see the faults in others. As a certain Nathanael has put it, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Today is Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. Dr. King is an example of someone who persevered in his call at a time when his skin color was seen as a separating factor, as something that marked him as less. But those in power who see the young as incapable or those with different skin and culture as less than human have eyesight that is growing dim, like Eli. Now remember that Eli was not a scoundrel himself. He was a priest of God after all and he performed his duties with integrity. But as the scriptures tell us over and over again he was not able to control his children. His sons were out of control and he couldn't do anything about it. It's ambiguous whether this is a comment on his role as a parent or whether this is a questioning of the wisdom of a hereditary priesthood, or as the rest of 1 and 2 Samuel set up, a hereditary monarchy. The behavior of the parents is no guarantee for the behavior of the children, after all, so perhaps this passage urges us to judge each person on his or her own merits.

God certainly judges Eli's sons based on their own actions. Just before Samuel's call, an unnamed man of God comes to Eli and pronounces a word of judgment on Eli's sons. Then as the second half of our reading describes, God's immediate purpose for calling Samuel is to continue to proclaim the coming of this judgment on the house of Eli. The LORD is about to act, he tells Samuel, and it is going to be big. As God tells Samuel, "I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle." Judgment is about to be fulfilled and it is Samuel's job to proclaim it. How did he feel, given such a task? How did Martin Luther King, Jr. or others of his time feel given the message they had to deliver? Those in power never like hearing that they are in the wrong. Yet it is the responsibility of all those willing to hear to listen to what God is telling us and to carry his message to those who need to hear it. For then we are acknowledging and making our own the words of Psalm 139. Psalm 139 celebrates the wonder of the human person, created marvelously, carefully, and secretly by God. If you are a unique and wonderful creation, then you are worth something. You have something to share with the world. Verse 15 says, "Your eyes beheld my limbs yet unfinished in the womb; all of them were written in your book." God forms us with such incredible love and reaches out to us. If only we would learn to hear his voice.

But perhaps you are still not as sure as Samuel. Maybe when you hear God calling you through an unlikely medium, you have doubts, maybe you even scorn the call. If so, you wouldn't be in such bad company, for Nathanael, a disciple of Christ, had such a response, which may be put this way, "Ha! Can anyone from Nazareth ever amount to anything?" Yet Jesus called Nathanael and through Philip's response, "come and see" Nathanael went. And he saw. He saw Jesus who revealed himself to Nathanael as who he really was, someone who is present at all places. Someone who knows us as we really are. Jesus told Nathanael that he knew him. Nathanael was stunned. And from that initial sensation of awe, came to be one of Jesus' disciples. It is that sense of awe in God's presence, the sense of awe at the fact that God reaches out to connect with us, that can bring us closer to God.

Perhaps you've not felt the driving necessity to challenge the establishment, to bring a particular word of God to someone else. Maybe the whole setting of Samuel's story seems alien and other. We at Christ Church don't worship in a temple as he did. And who's heard of a Nazirite in the last two thousand years? But the Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 6 that our body is a temple. You are the temple of the Holy Spirit. And even without making massive vows to dedicate ourselves to the LORD, we can honor God with our bodies. In fact, how we act directly affects God, for we are the body of Christ. But not only that, our *bodies* are members of Christ. How easily do we fall into a frame of mind that says God cares only about our souls? Or that the body is inherently evil because it can be tempted? Our very language implies such a dualism. What do you think when you hear the word "carnal"? How about "spiritual"? In opposition to such a split the Apostle Paul tells us that we are united to Christ and one with him. Our bodies are sacred vessels and every act we perform can be holy. Eating can be holy. Fasting or refraining from eating can be holy. Sleeping, playing, working, loving, these are all done with bodies and all can be holy. Monks and nuns while setting aside significant portions of time to pray try to perform all actions, from hoeing an onion patch to doing the dishes; from visiting a sick sister to dusting the ceiling, as acts of prayer to God. There is a monastic saying that the walls of your cell will teach you everything you need to know. By using the raw material of our daily lives we can learn to see God in the banal and then what we thought at first to be boring or pointless will turn out to be shimmering with Divine Presence. As Gerard Manley Hopkins saw it: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God."

Becoming attuned to the presence of God in the world and forming our lives into prayer are not done easily and are by no means a requirement for somehow gaining our own salvation. Rather, our actions while flowing from who we are, also shape who we are. And so they can bring us ever closer to unity with God. A calling from God is much more than a vocation to the diaconate, much more than a vocation to the priesthood. A calling from God exists for every Christian and in the words of the catechism such a calling “is to represent Christ... to bear witness to him... and to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world.” Is this not what Dr. King sought to accomplish by bringing blacks and whites together in forgiveness, respect, and love? Even as we seek to understand what God is saying to us, let us seek to carry out his work in the world until, as the Apostle John writes, we come to the day when he is revealed, and we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is. Amen.