

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF DENTON
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SERMON: CALLING? SOMEONE'S CALLING? WHOSE CALLING US?

TEXT: I SAMUEL 3: 1-10

"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. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 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. Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" 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. 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." Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. 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. 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. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Today's scripture is a part of a far larger story. Our portion has three primary characters:

Eli, a feeble old man who has been the High Priest of Israel for many, many years and the head of an order of priests which was promised to last forever.

God, almighty and mysterious, who pops up unexpectedly, who is quiet but persistent, and who raises up and casts down.

Samuel, Eli's young assistant, who had been promised to God by his mother. He had served Eli for many years. He was innocent, humble, and obedient to whatever Eli told him to do. He did not yet know the Lord and heard the Word of God.

Let me say just a word about that last statement. The quote is: "Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him."

That does NOT mean that Samuel was an unbeliever. We use phrases like "did/does not know the Lord" differently now. Back then what the author of I Samuel was trying to say was that God had not spoken directly to Samuel before this event – only to his Master, Eli. Samuel had served under Eli's direction in the Temple of God and entered the Holy of Holies, certainly he believed in God.

Now, to the story:

Eli sleeps. Samuel, too, has dozed off in the Temple. [I hope you don't hear this as permission to sleep through the rest of the service!]

In the middle of the night God speaks: "Samuel, Samuel." Samuel jumps up, assumes his master had called, and ran to Eli and said "Here I am, for you called me." Eli says, "I didn't call – go back to sleep." Confused but obedient he returns to his mat and to sleep.

God calls Samuel's name a second time. Again, Samuel misunderstands and runs to his master, Eli, who again shushes him and tells him to go back to sleep.

God calls Samuel's name a third time! Yet again, Samuel does not understand and runs to Eli. Eli, by now roused, finally understands. At last somebody understands! Eli might have lost a step or two but he recognizes the holy voice that intrudes where it is least expected. He tells Samuel what to do.

Samuel returns to his mat and goes back to sleep, but when God called his name for a fourth time, he responds as Eli told him, "Speak, for your servant is listening." With this simple response an important new chapter in God's great story begins.

It's a fascinating story!

God could have caused an earthquake to get Samuel's attention. Or God could have moved on and found someone else more receptive to his word. But instead God called, softly in the dark. And when Samuel misunderstood, God kept called, again and again, until at last, Samuel got the message.

It makes me wonder, how many times has God called our names and we were distracted or inattentive or just plain rolled over and decided not to answer a call in the night?

What might we have missed? A word of hope. A call to ministry? The answer to a fervent prayer. Even the numbers for the next mega lottery winning ticket?

Who knows what we might have missed because we were so wrapped up in survival issues or in personal pleasures or secular fulfillments?

One thing I like about this story: God called Samuel by name.

It's not that I think God usually addresses people "hey Bub, "hello darling" or "hey, you there!"

It's that God was not looking for a generic 5'10" brunette male to replace a leading actor – God was seeking a specific, unique individual for a specific, unique mission. And he called the chosen on by his name.

How glorious it must be to not only hear the word of God but to hear God call your name! Can you imagine – your name, called in the darkness, by the Creator and redeemer?

Samuel was called to a specific mission. To understand that we need to go beyond the text we read.

If you read the chapter before then you find out that Eli, a good man, had two evil sons. Really – evil. Hophni and Phinehas, who the Bible describes as degenerate and exploiting of their position.

Eli apparently was powerless to control the two young men, or unwilling. What they were doing was so bad, and since all previous remedies had failed, God had to take extraordinary measures. That's where Samuel came in.

God calls Samuel to take Samuel's place and be the next great prophet of Israel. In this new life he would:

- ❖ Still lead a humble life
- ❖ Walk hand and hand with God
- ❖ Counsel rulers and peasants

- ❖ Represent the awesome “doom” of God upon the people
- ❖ Face incredible pressure from the people
- ❖ Occasionally fear for his life
- ❖ Yet walk with God’s love, blessing and protection like a hand resting lightly upon his shoulder.

His life changed the moment he replied to God’s call! He was truly, God’s servant!

But his first duty as God’s prophet was to deliver to Eli God’s judgment, which was that his role of prophet was revoked and that his entire order of priesthood was ended. God decertified Eli’s entire order!

God had promised that Eli’s order of priests would endure forever. Apparently that promise hinged on their continued faithfulness to God. Eli’s sons, who were heirs to the title of High Priest of Israel, were the worst offenders, corrupting the other priests. When their faith ended so did God’s promise to them.

This was hard for Samuel. He loved and respected Eli. He did not want to hurt Eli. He delayed and avoided telling him. Finally Eli called him, Samuel’s answer was the same he gave to God – “Here I am.” Eli had to practically drag it out of him.

What God announced was the destruction of the dominant priestly family and religious system on which Israel had relied for hundreds of years. For the priests and their families it was the equivalent of the great flood in Noah’s time – and only Samuel got on the boat! All the rest were lost.

When Eli, who had always served God faithfully, learned of his fate and that of his sons and his order of priesthood, Samuel held his breath. But Eli responded with faithfulness and obedience. Hear his words, “It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.” Spoken like a true man of God whose trust in God never fails.

All of that, coming from a whispered encounter with God in the night!

God still calls men and women of good faith, calling and inviting them to join God as servants and partners in God’s great works of justice, redemption and salvation.

The question is: Is anyone listening?

The story of Samuel teaches us that if we would hear God call our name:

- We must be open and ready to being called.
- We have to faith enough to perceive and understand who is calling.
- We have to be willing to be silent and listen when our Awesome God speaks.
- And we have to be humble and obedient when God directs us.

Do we have anyone who meets those qualifications? Do you meet those qualifications?

If so, you too might hear your name called in the night. Can you imagine that?

And can you imagine your own voice answering, “Here I am. Speak, for your servant is listening.” Can you imagine?