

## Calling a Child

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
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*Preached on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, (15Jan), 2012.*

Text: 1Samuel 3:8b-9b

“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 thy servant hears.”’”

We’re in the liturgical season of call stories, both from the New Testament and Old. Each Sunday over the next few weeks the lectionary prescribes stories of callings. This one is the story of Samuel’s call. It is unusual in scripture, for this is the calling of a child, through the agency of the much older and, in many ways, very fallible Eli. What can we learn from it?

First, the background I didn’t read you: Hannah, the mother of Samuel, was unable to bear a child, and she was heartsick about it. She and her family attended the yearly festival at the Shiloh Temple; she prayed for a child.<sup>1</sup> More than that, she offered to dedicate the child to the Lord. The old priest there, Eli, saw her praying, and he also asked God to grant her request.<sup>2</sup> After Samuel was born and weaned, Hannah was true to her word. She brought him back to the Temple to assist Eli.<sup>3</sup> I told you that the priest Eli was *fallible*. That, perhaps, is not quite strong enough. Eli had sons of his own, and these sons were worthless louts. The text tells us they ‘had no regard for the LORD.’ They took advantage of worshippers who came to Shiloh, and Eli knew it. He was permissive and let their behavior go on.<sup>4</sup> Eli was admonished by a prophet about his sons, but did not stop their corruption.<sup>5</sup>

When the little boy Samuel came to Shiloh, he assisted Eli. We are told, “the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.”<sup>6</sup> The boy kept the lamps burning, filling them with oil. One night when Samuel was within the Temple near the Ark, he awoke, hearing a voice, and assumed it was Eli in the other room. The text tells us, “Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.”<sup>7</sup> He went to ask Eli what he wanted. And each time, Eli said he hadn’t called Samuel. Finally, after hearing the voice a third time, old the elderly priest perceived the voice might be God’s. So he instructed

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<sup>1</sup> 1Samuel 1:2-11.

<sup>2</sup> 1Samuel 1:17.

<sup>3</sup> 1Samuel 1:24-28.

<sup>4</sup> 1Samuel 2:12-17, 22-25.

<sup>5</sup> 1Samuel 2:27ff.

<sup>6</sup> 1Samuel 3:1b.

<sup>7</sup> 1Samuel 3:7.

Samuel: “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for thy servant hears.’”<sup>8</sup> Though an imperfect priest, Eli directed the lad and introduced him to God.

I love the next line in the story. “And the LORD came and stood forth, calling as at [the] other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And Samuel said, ‘Speak, LORD, for thy servant hears.’”<sup>9</sup> This was the boy’s call to be a prophet. In Hebrew religion a prophet speaks the word of the Lord. Now the word Samuel had to speak was a prediction for the end of the house of Eli because of its corruption. And, yet, Eli was the instrument by which Samuel was able to perceive and respond to the call of God! What else can we learn from this story?

First, *faith is not handed down with the genes*. If it were, Eli’s sons would not have been the louts that they were. Faith comes through a calling of God and works the purposes of God. But how will a person—child or adult—know God is calling unless instructed by someone who knows God? You don’t have to be perfect to introduce another to God. (*After all, faith is about God, not us.*) Still faith, religion and our church will not last another generation unless we take care to provide instruction, preach and teach the gospel, and lead young people to faith. We have no advance certainty about whom God will call. What we do is help the next generation know *about* God so that should God call, they will know who it is who speaks to them and how to respond. Faith is not *inevitable* and is not even *natural*. We aren’t born with it. We have to receive it from God, with the assistance of Scripture and guides who know God.

Second, *it is better to be in the house of the Lord* than outside. The Temple is where Samuel’s mother’s prayer was heard and where she brought Samuel in gratitude to God. The Temple is where Samuel was when he heard God’s call. Yes, God can speak anywhere, but the community where people intentionally seek God is always a good place to seek the Lord. Those in the house of faith help us discern the true from false voices we hear, and here is where we hear the scriptures taught. We may change and times may change, but God doesn’t. If you know the ways God behaved in ancient times, you are in a better place to discern where God is going today. It is a good thing to be in the house of the Lord.

Third, even in times when the word of God is rare, *God can still speak, still call us*. In the Wednesday Bible Study this week we read about the call of the disciples by Jesus. The class remarked how interesting it was that Jesus just said, “*Follow me,*” and the original disciples dropped what they were doing and followed him. I told the class that it is possible that we don’t know everything that happened the day of those calls. Perhaps there was more said by Jesus than the simple *follow me*. I don’t think it was Jesus’ animal magnetism or what we call charisma that explains it. God was in Christ<sup>10</sup> and that is not something that can be ignored by those whom

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<sup>8</sup> 1Samuel 3:9.

<sup>9</sup> 1Samuel 3:10.

<sup>10</sup> 2Corinthians 5:19.

God has chosen to call. I told them a few stories about other calls and how sometimes God uses a story or a sermon to trigger a call in a person. The Scriptures also have a power to speak, even in times like the present, when again the word of the Lord is rare. How will we discover God's word for us if the gospel is not preached?<sup>11</sup> How will we divine God's messages to our generation if we ignore the Scriptures? If we neglect the church? If we fail to introduce the rising generation to the knowledge of God? God still calls through sermon, teaching, and Scripture. Are we listening?

So, what does this story teach us? At least three things: first, faith is not handed down with the genes. It is not natural that we believe. It comes through hearing the call of God.<sup>12</sup> Second, it is here, in the church, where God is known and has spoken before, where we must be—regularly and faithfully. And, third, even though we live in a time when it is commonly assumed God does not speak, God still can speak, still does reveal himself, still does call people into partnership to do his will.

It is easy to assume because times are difficult and the call of Samuel and others happened ages and ages ago, that God is no longer active. But that is a very, very shaky assumption. Times may be tough because our generation has not sought God's word. Yet God still speaks. Do we know how to listen? Where to look? How to respond? Of course, we do. Today listening to me may be one or two persons struggling with a problem or decision. I don't know about their problems or decisions. I'm just preaching up here about a 3000 year old story of a call of a young man. But God is calling. I'll tell you what to do. Say, "Speak, LORD, for thy servant hears."

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<sup>11</sup> Romans 10:14.

<sup>12</sup> Romans 10:17.