

Listening for God's Call

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Texts: 1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51

One of the interesting things about cellphones is ringtones. Not only is there an nearly infinite variety of potential rings but you can get dozens of sounds, and hundreds of different pieces of music if you want to. And as many of you already know, you can attach a particular ringtone to a certain person so that when you hear that ringtone, you know who's calling. I used to have "If I Only Had a Brain" for when it was the kids calling – otherwise I think on that phone it was Pachelbel's Canon in D. Currently my phone rings as a bongo drum, and I don't have any ringtones assigned to particular callers. And of course, we don't really need ringtones to tell us who is calling because we can see on the cellphone, and on many landlines who is calling.

That would have been useful to the boy Samuel sleeping in the temple and waking to hear his name called... "Samuel! Samuel!" If only he'd had caller ID, he would have known: "Oh, it's God calling, 'Hello? God? Speak, your servant is listening!'"

We talk a lot in the church about God's call – and yet, we're not always very clear about what we mean by that. And so we have a fair number of people wondering whether God could call them, and if so, what would that be like and would they know? Good questions – indeed, great questions!! Later we will be ordaining and installing officers—men and women whom we describe as being called by God through the vote of the congregation to serve elders and deacons, leading the ministry of Frame and the compassion of Frame through their service.

"Called by God through the vote of the congregation" is a far cry from the voice in the night calling Samuel by name... or from the dialogue that we had in our confession this morning. So what is a call from God? How do we know it? What should we do about it?

First off, let's distinguish between two kinds of calls – one will call the permissive call of God, and the other we'll call the prescriptive call of God. Or you could think of these as the general call and the personal call. The permissive, or general, call of God is the way we are all called, all the time. This is the call to love our neighbors as ourselves, to welcome the immigrant, to feed the hungry, to speak the truth in love. These are calls that arise out of God's Word to us. This is the kind of call that we responded to in welcoming the Warming Shelter here to our building. The Bible has a clear mandate to care for those in need, and so the Session responded to that mandate. These calls are always out there—the Bible has some pretty clear instructions on a variety of issues.

But what about the other kind of call—the prescriptive, or personal call? This is the call where someone might say something like, "I feel called to work on hunger issues on Portage County" or "I have a sense of call to ministry," or "I felt called to march on

Washington with Martin Luther King, Jr.” These are more particular or personal calls. How do those come about?

These come from not only reading the Bible, but reading the world, and listening to our lives. This is where Frederick Buechner’s definition of vocation comes from: “The place where God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Parker Palmer writes in much the same way in his book *Let Your Life Speak* [page 10]: “Today I understand vocation quite differently – not as a goal to be achieved but as a gift to be received. Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God.”

So for example, a person might sense a call to teaching through a variety of experiences—from people mentioning how good they are with kids, or by noticing themselves how much joy they experience when they have the opportunity to help someone understand something. Reading our lives can come from our inner experience, from what we observe about the world and our work in it, or from the observations of others.

Now, just because Buechner talks about vocation having to do with where our great gladness meets the world’s deep hunger, it doesn’t mean that when we are called to do something it always makes us happy or that we feel good about it. Taking the last of the examples I gave, a person might feel a deep call to go to Washington and march for civil rights—they care passionately about the issue, they feel that the timing is important (as in the book of Esther, Esther was told that it might be “for such a time as this” that she had become queen – to use her influence in a key way). But at the same time, the person could feel afraid of marching—they might be concerned about possible arrests, or that if their employer found out it might cost them their job. A sense of call doesn’t necessarily mean an absence of fear. Think about Jesus and his call—Jesus felt called to go from Galilee to Jerusalem and confront the priests and scribes. He knew what it would cost him. Indeed, the night he was arrested, he prayed in anguish “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible. Take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want, but what you want.” Jesus didn’t feel peaceful about what was to come. But he felt clarity about what he should do. And his clarity came from a lifetime of prayer, of listening for God’s wisdom, rather than praying to promote his own agenda.

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke about his own sense of call, and on the night of January 27, 1956 when he was just 27 years old, he got a phone call that clarified his sense of call. The call was a threat. “We’re tired of you and your mess here.” It was during the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. “And if you’re not out of here in three days, we’re going to blow your house up and blow your brains out.” And he heard a voice, an inner voice that said “Martin Luther, stand up for truth. Stand up for justice. And stand up for righteousness.” He said, later, “I’m trying to do what is right.” He said that it was at that time that he realized he might die. Twelve years later, on the night before he would be killed, he spoke about that possibility: “Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness...

That's the question before you tonight. Not, 'If I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to all of the hours that I usually spend in my office every day and every week as a pastor?' The question is not, 'If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?' [It's] 'If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?' That's the question.

"Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation. And I want to thank God, once more, for allowing me to be here with you... Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

Following the call of God might cost us. Not laughing at a racist or homophobic joke that a friend tells might cost us. Telling the truth at work might cost us. Refusing to help a friend cheat on a test might cost us. My childhood pastor did go to march with Dr. King, multiple times, and my church fired him. I learned that pastors should work for justice. And I also learned that following God's call might cost me.

Jesus said to Andrew, "Follow me." That's part of the general call—we're all invited to follow Jesus. And following Jesus might cost us—it might cost us time and money, it might cost us friendships or prestige, at times it may cost us peace of mind, and it may even cost us our lives. I knew when I went to Colombia that our friends there have been threatened. We're pretty sure that we can stay safe when we go there. But we know that human rights workers there have been killed, and still, standing with them is the right thing to do. Yes, following Jesus could cost us our lives.

But following Jesus will also give us our lives. Following Jesus will make a difference in our lives, and it will give us the opportunity to make a difference in the world. It will give us the satisfaction of embodying hope, of doing the right thing; it will grow our gifts, and challenge our certainties, and deepen our trust. And it will give us the experience of being deeply loved, and of sharing the love of God with others, for Christ's sake. Listen for God's call.

Amen.