

1 Samuel 3: 1-20; John 1: 43-51

Call and Response

[Read 1 Samuel 3: 1-20]

John 1: 43-51 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

On the cover of the Order of Worship, you see the very recognizable painting of the young Samuel by Sir Joshua Reynolds, from the late 18th century. My mother in Japan who also receives the email I send to you all with the Order of Worship wrote back to me right away saying "Your grandmother used to gaze at that painting and pray all the time!" I remember that. It hung on the wooden frame of a sliding closet door made of paper, in my grandmother's one room casita with straw mat *tatami* floor, like the floor in the zendo at Bodhi. I can still picture my grandma, intently listening to God, with that painting helping her to focus. In my memory, she even assumed the posture of Samuel in the painting. It came as close to an icon as anything we had in our house.

Perhaps it's that memory that prompted me to frame a copy of it as a gift to our own Shiloh when she was baptized last summer, the day after her 7th birthday, responding to God's call she had somehow heard. Perhaps, you have some memory around that painting, too.

The faint but certain ray of light streaming down on Samuel is met with Samuel's focused gaze and his attentive posture towards the source of that light, the word of the Lord. The painter captured a moment of "Call and Response," a moment that comes to the young and the old and those in between.

Though this painting is known by the title "Infant Samuel," when the word of the Lord came to Samuel, he was no longer a small child, let alone an infant. He was, by then, a young man serving God under the priest Eli at Shiloh, the religious capital of Israel at the time.

Young Samuel knew that he was literally dedicated to God's service, because his mother Hannah had promised God, even before he was knitted in her womb as her first-born. But God had not yet revealed to him what his life of service would be about. Do you remember those days in your life, when you knew that you were meant to serve God but was not sure exactly what that looked like?

When God called "Samuel, Samuel!" Samuel was in fact lying down in the temple where the ark of God was. He was practically sharing the room with God, but it didn't occur to him it was God who was calling. So, a good servant that he was, he ran to Eli the priest. And it took this life-long servant of God Eli three times before it dawned on him that what Samuel was responding to was not a voice in his dream or mere imagination but the call from God.

Even when Samuel knew very well that his life was in service of God, when God did call, he needed to be redirected by another discerning servant of God, Eli, to take up the stance of listening and respond to God. Now that Samuel's been prepared by Eli how to respond should God calls again, God "came and stood there," if you can imagine, calling Samuel once again.

Do you remember who helped you to listen to God's call? We see in today's Gospel reading, how the witness of one follower led to the others' encounter with Jesus. I remember thinking, when I first learned who "missionaries" were, oh, my mother is my missionary, because she brought me to the church. I know someone who would say, for him it was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He didn't meet Dr. King personally, but listening to his speech and witnessing his nonviolence actions, he knew he was a prophet. He didn't grow up going to church, but the week after Dr. King was assassinated, he felt compelled to go to church to learn about this God Dr. King followed till the end, even to his own death; he was 14 and it opened the door to a life of service of his own.

Our moments of Call and Response are fruition of collaborative efforts unbeknownst to us. We don't discern God's call alone, nor do we discern God's call because we are good or perfect, as this story of Eli reveals.

When Samuel did listen, he learned that God was about to do something that sounded quite tragic to Samuel, who was naturally sympathetic to Eli. The time Samuel lived was the time of spiritual desolation in Israel. The sons of Eli the priest were corrupt, taking advantage of their status and misappropriating the offerings to God people brought to the temple. They had no regard for God and were only interested in fattening themselves up. Eli knew this and rebuked

them; he tried to correct them but to no avail; he had failed to stop his sons from abusing others and offending God. So, God came down with judgment to remove Eli's line from serving as God's priest; Eli and his family would have no place in God's future for the house of Israel. That was the harsh message Samuel had to deliver to Eli, who was his teacher and master. After hearing what God intended to do, Samuel waited for the morning and then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord; he let the light in, casting out the darkness of the corruption and injustice.

Our moments of Call and Response compel us to action, because serving God means serving God who would not tolerate injustice that corrupts God's world. Serving God means serving God's good and loving intention for the world for which God cares so deeply. And that world is the one that is suffering injustice, corruption and war, where greed and self-interest appear to have an upper hand and where lies are propagated as truth. The harsh judgment God on the state of the world is actually a promise that God would not have it this way. God's judgment is our hope that the world need not endure the suffering.

But who is fit to serve such God whose intention is to transform and redeem the whole world? It sounds like a task out of proportion to any human being. The Psalm for today, Psalm 139 from which we will read later, and the Gospel lesson for today tell us, God who calls us is the God who knows us, through and through. Jesus knew Nathanael was genuinely faithful even before Nathanael came to recognize Jesus as Son of God and was skeptical if anything good could come out of Nazareth. Nazareth was about the size of Jemez Springs and had nothing that made it significant in any way.

God calls us, knowing our human limitations and weaknesses; God calls us as we are, and who we are, just the way God made us, is enough, to fulfill whatever the part God has for us to do in God's plan that is vast and beyond the best we could hope for.

Too aware of our own limitations and overwhelmed by the corruption of the world, we can get discouraged too easily. But the Scripture tells us we can take comfort that God knows what God is doing when God calls us; all we need to do is to respond, in faith, not in our ability to do anything but in God's ability to use what is imperfect to serve God's perfect plan.

That's the only way we can face our moment of Call and Response.

Since we are all too aware of how limited our visions and capabilities are, we just have to trust that God knows whom God calls. We can't imagine how we would ever be enough, but God knows.

the Lord's call reaches for weak beings whom he entrusts with a task out of proportion to their strength.

All those sent by God are aware of this and use their natural inability as an objection. Moses, Jeremiah, Amos. Every human being remains an "infant," unable to utter a word of God.

The moment of "Call and Response" comes at different times in our lives, though we may barely register in our consciousness, because our minds are usually so full of chatter.

And when we do register it, it is often met with unbelief, doubt, or resistance, but the moments of Call and Response are the stuff our life of faith is made of. They are what propel our us to respond to the call "come and see."

Do you ever wonder how you even got this idea in your head that your life is a life of service to God? We may not remember all of them or even a few, but there have been people who were God sent in your life, as there have been generation to generation. Because of them, here you are, saying "Here I am!" this morning, in the house of the Lord. You've heard the call and you responded. When we pray the Prayer of Illumination together, we are saying, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." And now, may your life be a witness to call others to discover their life as life of service to God.