

Sermon
Rev. Sonja L. Ingebritsen
October 15, 2017
I Samuel 3: 1-21, Call of Samuel

Here I Am

May the words spoken and the words received be only in your service, great God of Love. Amen.

“Here I am, God. Speak for your servant is listening.”

Scripture tells us that Samuel is ministering to the Lord under Eli—that is, he is an apprentice in the priestly tradition and still a young boy--when he made himself available to hear God’s word to him. He comes by his open-hearted faith honestly, modeled by his mother, Hannah. In her gratitude for having become pregnant after years of barrenness, Hannah dedicates Samuel to the service of God. And it is to this boy that the word of God comes, to bring words of judgment to Eli’s household and, later, to anoint Saul, the first king of the Israelites.

It is the *boy* Samuel with whom God found favor and empowered for this important task. Samuel is a child. Away from his parents. A nobody in the power structure. Not savvy enough to figure out how to work the system. And yet God called *him*. God supplied him with what he needed to speak God’s truth to power.

The story of Samuel tells us that God’s call comes to each of us. We don’t have to be anyone other than who we are to participate in God’s saving grace for the world. Joyce Ann Mercer writes, “God invites us to participate in God’s life in all the ages and conditions in which we live, from the days of youth ‘even to old age and gray hairs.’”¹ In fact, she proposes, sometimes our calling is not what we *ourselves* do, but what we can evoke in other. Sometimes we are called to *receive*. For example, the vulnerabilities of a baby, or an elderly person, or an ill person can call out new ways of caring and giving from a community.

Very few of us are called to the spectacular, like Moses or Samuel. But we are *all* called to the redemptive work of God. There is a Jewish concept called *tikkun olam*, which means “the means healing of the world.” Rachel Naomi Remen describes it as “a collective task. She says, “It involves all people who have ever been born, all people presently alive, all people yet to be born. We are all healers of the world ...It’s not about healing the world by making a huge difference. It’s about the world that touches you.”² A phrase I like to use is “sphere of influence.” We are all part of a particular set of connections in the world. It is here, and from here, that we are called to participate in this healing.

Caleb Wilde goes on to define *tikkun olam* like this: “In some ways it’s the work of a birth doula. Of waiting. Of listening. Of being a steady and small guide in the birth of life. Changing the world sometimes involves massive movements, but mostly it can be accomplished through small acts of presence, listening, and kindness.”³

We who are Christian understand *tikkun olam* to be incarnated in the life of Jesus. We are all freed *through* Christ *for* the redemptive work of God *by* the Spirit *as* the body of Christ. Henri Nouwen phrases it this way: “All followers of Jesus are called to ministry. ... Ministry is the

¹ “What does Christian vocation look like for the elderly?” by Joyce Ann Mercer
<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/what-does-christian-vocation-look-elderly>

² In *Confessions of a Funeral Director*, by Caleb Wilde, 50-51.

³ In *Confessions of a Funeral Director*, by Caleb Wilde, 50-51

fruit of your finding gifts and offering what you have. It is a vocation each of us claims by virtue of our baptism in the body of Christ. ... If you are living in communion with God, if you know you are the beloved, and if you make yourself available for service, you cannot do other than minister. Ministry is the overflow of your love for God and others.”⁴

Ministry, or calling, then, is not limited by our age or circumstances or resources or influence. It is a matter of our authenticity before and love for God.

Parker Palmer has also written a lot about call and vocation. Initially he thought vocation was about trying to be someone other than who he was, someone better than who he was, someone who didn't have his limitations. In his book *Let Your Life Speak*, he says, “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. ... It is a strange gift, this birthright gift of self. ... There is a Hasidic tale,” he writes, “that reveals, with amazing brevity, both the universal tendency to want to be someone else and the ultimate importance of becoming one's self: Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man, said, “In the coming world, they will not ask me: ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me: ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”⁵

Palmer goes on to say: “Quaker teacher Douglass Steere was fond of saying that the ancient human question ‘Who am I?’ leads inevitably to the equally important question ‘Whose am I?’ for there is no selfhood outside of relationship. We must ask the questions of selfhood and answer it as honestly as we can, no matter where it takes us. ... As I learn more about the seed of true self that was planted when I was born, I also learn more about the ecosystem in which I was planted—the network of communal relations in which I am called to live responsively, accountably, and joyfully with beings of every sort. Only when I know both seed and system, self and community, can I embody the great commandment to love both my neighbor and myself.”⁶

Here are three additional quotes about calling, or vocation.

One is from a second century theologian, St. Irenaeus: “The glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God.” Some have translated this as: “The glory of God is [a human being] fully alive.”⁷

You can hear an echo of this in 20th century theologian Howard Thurman: “Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”⁸

And a contemporary theologian Frederick Buechner has written this very famously about vocation: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”⁹

Our vocation, or calling, exists within this dance of our joys and the world's needs. The psalmist writes “Take delight in God, and God will give you the desires of your heart. (Ps 37:4) Delighting in God means that our hearts' desires are aligned with God's desires for us and the world. “You were called to freedom, [siblings in Christ];” Paul writes to the Galatians, “only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other

⁴ *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*, Henri Nouwen, p 131

⁵ In *Let Your Life Speak*, by Parker J. Palmer, p 10-11

⁶ Palmer, p 16-17

⁷ https://www.taize.fr/en_article6431.html

⁸ <https://www.bu.edu/thurman/about/history/>

⁹ https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/19982.Frederick_Buechner

through love. All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: *Love your neighbor as yourself.*” (Galatians 5:13-14a) And through the Spirit, we’re told in Corinthians, we are given particular gifts for this common good. (I Corinthians 12:7-10).

This doesn’t mean we won’t be called to do hard things.

This doesn’t mean our calling will always be fun.

But it does mean that if we listen for those places within us where we are most fully alive and use those gifts for the healing of the world around us, we will be able to say that we, along with Moses and Samuel, have been faithful in responding, “Here I am, God. Use me.”

Amen.