

“Accept the call!” A sermon by Lee Ireland  
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church  
June 3, 2018  
1 Samuel 3:1-20

Let us pray together: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

Do you wish that God would communicate with you the way God communicated with Samuel? Samuel’s call from God was so clear and persistent. God called Samuel three times before Eli finally figured out it was God’s voice that Samuel was hearing. It took an older, wiser person to help Samuel understand God was calling him. Then Samuel responds: **Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.**

Who is Samuel? You may remember that Samuel’s mother, Hannah, was considered barren – unable to have children. She and her husband went to the temple at Shiloh to sacrifice. Eli, the prophet we read about in today’s verses, observed Hannah and accused her of being drunk. Hannah responded to Eli that she was not drunk, but deeply disturbed and was pouring out her soul to God. Eli told Hannah that whatever she was praying for would be granted to her. Little did Eli realize that Hannah was praying that if she had a son she would dedicate him to the Lord. Hannah did conceive and, after the child was weaned, she dedicated him to the Lord.

The idea of dedicating your child to God may seem odd to us today. However, in the last few months we have baptized three children. Part of what I say during the baptism dedicates the child to God. My exact words are – ‘child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.’ We may not send a child off to be an assistant to the minister as Hannah did physically moving Samuel from her home to the temple at Shiloh. But we do recognize that we all belong to God – Christ’s own forever.

So, Samuel grew up in the temple at Shiloh serving the Lord, under Eli’s tutelage.

We can see that the story of Samuel at Shiloh doesn’t start with God’s voice or Eli’s training, but starts with God’s promise that Hannah would have a son, would suckle him, take care of him, pray for him, sing songs over him so that he could be given to God to learn how to be a prophet. In today’s vocabulary, you might call Hannah’s and Samuel’s story a prequel to today’s old testament reading.

Perhaps we may want to consider our prequel to God calling us. We learn from Psalm 139, verse 16: **Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.** God knew Samuel before he came down the birth canal. God knew you before you were born. Just as Hannah cared for Samuel each of us was cared for and brought before God through a series of relationships. We’ve all had a person or persons who have mentored us, who have helped us to know God’s call on our lives. Parents, family members, friends, pastors have shepherded and nurtured us to a place where we, like Samuel, may hear

God call. They have helped us to attune our ears and heart to hear from God. Who were those people for you?

Some of you may say that you've never heard God's call, whether it be a distinct voice or through someone else or by just the feeling that God is directing you. To use an image most of us are familiar with today, I believe that you just aren't sure that our cell phone is ringing. Is God really calling? And if you answer the phone, you're not sure the voice on the other end is really God's rather than just some idea that popped into your head.

E. Stanley Jones who was a missionary in India for years, tells the story of his call from God. When he was 23 years old, a college president asked him to teach at the college. The president told him, "It is the will of the student body, the will of the townspeople, the will of the faculty and we believe it is the will of God for you to teach at this college." At the same time a friend wrote Jones telling him it was the will of God that Jones go into evangelist work in America. To top it all off, the denomination he belonged to wrote him a letter telling him that they wanted to send him to India. Jones called all these communications a 'traffic jam of wills.' After much prayer, he decided to go to India where he ministered faithfully until his death. (Homileticonline.com, Taking the Call, 1/14/2018)

At times, discerning God's voice can be difficult, but as Jones proved with prayer and discernment, you can understand that it is God's voice. You can understand what God is asking you to do.

Perhaps you worry that God will ask you to do something you wouldn't want to do. God didn't exactly give Samuel an easy first assignment! Couldn't God have been a bit easier on Samuel? Samuel hesitated to tell his mentor, Eli, that God was going to punish Eli's family for their sins. Eli didn't punish Samuel or dismiss the words Samuel heard from God, but simply accepted them: **"He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes."** No matter the call or task assigned, God takes care of you.

So, how can we tell when God is calling? I mean, there's not a photo of God on our smart phone when we get an incoming call from God.

In that regard, a 19th-century bishop's experience is useful. John Seybert was the first bishop of the Evangelical Church that specialized in ministry to the German-speaking immigrants on the American frontier.

Seybert was born in 1791, entered the ministry in 1820 and became, somewhat reluctantly, a bishop in 1839 - reluctant because he didn't think he was worthy. In those days, being a bishop meant you worked harder and traveled even more than the regular circuit riders. Seybert traveled constantly to begin new congregations and minister to people on the frontier. From his journals, we know that he logged some 175,000 miles by horse and wagon, preached 9,850 sermons, made 46,000 pastoral calls, held 8,000 prayer meetings and helped establish congregations throughout the Midwest. For all this, he received a salary of \$100 per year, out of which he paid all his expenses.

Before entering the ministry, Seybert was a cooper - a barrel maker - and he was making a decent living at that trade, but he thought he was feeling the call of God to preach. He wasn't sure, however, and delayed answering the call because he was uncertain whether God was truly calling him. But here's what he wrote in his journal:

I should have gone sooner, had I been certain that the Lord wanted me to go. However, I had no rest at my cooperage, and concluded that the only way to get into the clear concerning this matter, was to make an effort. If the Lord blesses my labor with the awakening and conversion of sinners, and the edification and encouragement of saints, I determined I would serve him in this way with all my ability, wherever I might have to go, whatever crosses I might have to bear, and however long the task might last.

This journal entry describes what we might call the "Seybert method," a way of determining if it's God on the line. Seybert wasn't sure, and so he finally decided to make a beginning in the direction that seemed right. He felt that if that wasn't God's will, he would soon find out by making a start. "If the Lord blesses my labor ..." Seybert wrote. Sometimes that's the only way we can determine the right thing to do - make a start at it.

Starting is always a sign of hope. Making a beginning is a statement of belief in -- or at least hope for -- a good outcome. And when we sense God calling us to make a beginning, at whatever that may be, it's important to not let discouragers or opponents or distractions turn us away. (Homileticsonline.com, Taking the Call, 1/14/2018)

Did you notice that Seybert wasn't sure it was God calling? When God calls we can either tap 'accept' or 'decline.' Please tap 'accept' and see what God has to say.

It may take time to understand God's call on your life. In speaking of their call, most people do not say it was an instantaneous change, but a slow awakening to God's call. In addition to their prayer and discernment to uncover the call, like Samuel, many people also found it may take others in your life to help you understand the call God has placed before you.

What are you waiting to start in your life? Is there something you may be wondering if God is giving you a nudge to start? Have you prayed it? Does it mean getting training, so you can start something? Are there people who are trying to discourage you or distract you from starting? Have you considered just starting to see where it leads?

Answer the call, saying, **Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.**