

Taking the Call

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

CWZepp, BWCOB, January 14, 2018

It generally happens to me maybe a few times each week on average. There I am, minding my own business, when my phone rings (or vibrates, or lights up – depending on where I've set the volume controls). But when look at the screen, instead of seeing the lovely face of my wife – who is by far my most frequent caller, or that of Jeff or someone else who calls often enough that I have taken the time to connect a picture to their number, or even the name of someone in my contacts, which now amounts to a pretty substantial list – instead, I just see a number. And in the span of a few moments, I have a decision to make – do I take the call?

Truth be told, it is not usually much of a decision for me. People who know me well know that I despise the telephone, especially when it interrupts whatever I am doing. So most friends text me, or if they want to have a conversation on the phone, they text first and ask when it would be a good time to call. Most others who don't know that protocol will leave a message, which I always make a point of receiving and returning when appropriate. Which means that it is very rare that I will actually take an unsolicited call, even when I know the caller, let alone when it comes from an unknown number.

This dilemma is a pretty recent one. The game changed back on March 10, 1876, when Thomas Watson, an assistant working with Alexander Graham Bell, became the first person to literally “take the call.” The two were working in different parts of their Boston laboratory that day, when he heard the words, “Mr. Watson, come here – I want to see you.” When he came to Bell as called, it was proof that these were the first words successfully transmitted by telephone¹.

There have been many famous (and infamous) calls taken throughout history. It will take a momentous event to top the one made on July 21, 1969, when astronauts Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong took a call from the President just after they had set foot on the moon.² But those first words heard by Thomas Watson over Bell's prototype telephone changed our world forever. From that moment on, the wheels were set in motion that led to our über connected world today. Personally, I blame Watson and Bell every time my dinner is interrupted by some special offer for home repairs or timeshare vacations in Florida, or the relentless robocalls from Virginia Blood Services.

Samuel, of course, did not have a telephone, not to mention the advantage of caller ID like I do today. And so when he heard a voice calling his name one late night, Samuel of course assumed the voice belonged to Eli, the only other person with him in the temple. And so he got up right away and ran to see what Eli wanted. It probably wasn't the first time the old man, who was nearly blind, had called out from his room for help from his young apprentice after he had laid down for the night. Only this time, Eli said he hadn't called.

¹ Randy Alfred, “March 10, 1876: ‘Mr. Watson, come here...’” *Wired*, March 10, 2008. Available: <https://www.wired.com/2011/03/0310bell-invents-telephone-mr-watson-come-here/>

² Jeff Nolte's Blog, "10 infamous phone calls from history." *Chesapeake Telephone Systems*, March 8, 2012. Available: <http://www.chesapeaketelphone.com/2012/03/08/10-infamous-phone-calls-from-history/>

And so after Eli had sent Samuel back to bed, and Samuel had snuggled back into his covers near the ark of God in the temple, you have to wonder what was going on inside Samuel's head. Maybe he had just barely drifted off to sleep and had dreamed that Eli was calling him. Yeah, that was probably it. So when he hears the voice again, my guess is that he wasn't sure whether he had heard the voice or not. But he got up and went as before. Same result. Maybe the old Eli is getting a touch of dementia. So the third time, when Samuel hears that same voice in the night, calling out his name, he has to really be wondering what he should do. Perhaps he could just pretend he was already fast asleep and didn't hear. Or maybe instead of getting up out of bed again, he could just shout out to see what Eli wanted. In the end, he throws off the covers once more and gets up and goes to Eli yet again. By now, Eli has figured out that something else is at work here. So he gives Samuel the now famous advice to go back to bed, and if he hears the voice again, to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Samuel does as he is told. And the next time he hears the call, he knows, or at least is beginning to understand, who is on the other end. When he says, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening," he does so knowing who is calling to him. And you have to wonder if he had really known the Lord at that point, or if he had had any inkling of what he would be told when he answered, whether Samuel still would have chosen to take the call.

Now something you may not know about this story from 1st Samuel as it appears in the Revised Common Lectionary: verses 11-20 come in parentheses. Basically, this means that they are optional reading in the liturgy. Interestingly enough, what this means is that we have the option to skip everything that happens after Samuel hears the call of God for the fourth time and replies, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." If only Samuel had the same option.

Commentator Richard Boyce observes:

A journalist reading declassified documents pays attention when she comes to text that has been blacked out. In a similar fashion, any disciple of the lectionary should be on guard when he encounters parentheses. Leave out the verses in the parentheses and you have a nice little story of an individual's call. Keep them in and you have a powerful story regarding the courage required to listen and to speak – especially if the one to whom you dedicate ears and lips is the Lord.³

So what is the urgent word that caused the Lord to wake up Samuel repeatedly during that night? It's not very pretty – Eli's sons are corrupt, and have been using their power and privilege as priests to embezzle the finest portions of the temple sacrifices and take advantage of the vulnerable women who came to worship at the tent of meeting.⁴ Eli knew this, but while he himself was faithful, he was not able to do anything about the abuses of his sons. And so the Lord is about to punish the house of Eli. That is the message that came to Samuel in the night. He wasn't instructed to deliver the message to Eli – that had already been done in the previous chapter by another unnamed prophet. All the Lord asked of Samuel that night was to listen. Such was the beginning of the prophetic ministry of Samuel.

So, to review – the young boy Samuel, who did not yet know the Lord, thrice mistakes God's call for that of his aging mentor, who finally cues him in that it just might be the voice of God calling. When the boy finally accepts God's call, he receives a message promising the

³*Feasting on the Word*. Year B, Vol. 1. p. 243.

⁴ See 1st Samuel 2.

imminent demise of his mentor's house. So ends the origin story of Samuel, one of Israel's greatest prophets.

It is an inauspicious beginning – Samuel taking the call. But in so many ways, it set the stage for everything that followed for Samuel. God called, Samuel made himself available, and a prophetic partnership ensued. As our scripture text for today ends, “Samuel grew up. God was with him, and Samuel's prophetic record was flawless. Everyone in Israel, from Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south, recognized that Samuel was the real thing—a true prophet of God.”⁵

Today's Gospel text also contains an origin story, and while very different from Samuel's it was probably just as unlikely⁶. To be perfectly honest, Nathanael didn't even really want to meet the guy. He was just doing it as a favor for his friend, Philip. I mean, honestly? Was he supposed to believe that some self-appointed teacher from that back woods little town of Nazareth was the one of whom the prophets spoke? It turned out, at least, that this Jesus had a sense of humor.

When he sees Nathanael coming, he greets him with the words, “[Now here comes] a real Israelite, not a false bone in his body.”⁷ Was it a backhanded compliment or an honest appreciation of Nathanael's candor? Regardless, Jesus seemed to know that Nathanael wasn't buying on Philip's recommendation, but he didn't take offense. And we who are looking in on this meeting soon realize there's a double meaning here. Jesus calling Nathanael an "Israelite in whom there is no deceit" brings echoes of the Jacob story to mind. Jacob, the deceiver, who stole his brother's birthright and his father's blessing, who finally earned the named Israel.

But this is an Israelite without deceit.

Nathanael might have been smiling at that point, but he still wasn't buying it. “Well...thanks, but...you don't know me!”⁸ Once more, Jesus surprises, “Ah, but I saw you under a fig tree!” Now that explains everything. Well played, Jesus!

It's an unlikely beginning for a relationship. But it too set the stage for everything. Nathanael took the call to be a disciple of Jesus and became part of his inner circle. The guy he didn't even want to meet turned out to be someone pretty special.

Such unlikely beginnings remind me of another. The time is 1955. The place: Montgomery, AL. The issue is forced segregation on city buses. Local pastors are gathered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church – strategizing. Rosa Parks has recently been arrested for refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white person. Her trial will be coming soon. A lot of ideas go back and forth, but nothing clear emerges. Until – the most unlikely thing happens. The young pastor of the church, still new to the town, unknown to the city fathers (and, some say, not yet intimidated by them) – a guy only in his 20's--raises his hand. The boycott elects their leader. And nothing will ever be the same.

⁵ 1st Samuel 3:19-20. *The Message*.

⁶ Thanks to the Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins for much of the imagery and wordplay that follows, inspired by her sermon “Where Heaven and Earth Meet,” January 15, 2012. Available: <http://day1.org/3457-where-earth-and-heaven-meet>

⁷ John 1:47, *The Message*.

⁸ John 1:48

Perhaps it is obvious by now that I am fascinated with origin stories. Whether we are talking about Samuel or Spiderman, Nathanael or Wonder Woman, Martin Luther King, Jr. or Luke Skywalker – I love hearing about where our heroes and our leaders come from and how they got their start. Since God’s call so rarely comes in the predictable, expected way that I like to receive my phone calls, what made me actually take the call? What makes any of us take the call?

Truth is, I’m not exactly sure. All I know is that I did. And we do. But I did find some resonance in the reflections on Samuel’s call from commentator Donna Schaper. In her own words:

When was the last time you felt a “tingle” about the word of God to you? When was the last time you experienced hope kicking into high gear?...Often we make decisions because we have experienced the tingle of fear. We heard the doctor say our cancer was back...we were so scared at how close we came to hitting that car that we had to stop and rest a minute in order to experience our body’s adrenaline rush. When we heard that our father lost his job, after his heart bypass, fear got our full attention...We tingled in fright.

What this passage recommends to us is that we begin to make decisions based on the tingle of hope. Oddly, the passage assures us that what God is going to do will make both ears tingle. Since I hate sermons that make us have to be more heroic than we really are, I say this: Let one ear tingle with fear. Fear is legitimate under most of the circumstances of most of our lives. Fear is spiritually legitimate. A lot has gone wrong. A lot of danger lurks. But listen now with the other ear. Hear what Samuel was reluctant to hear: God is going to do a new thing, which will make both of our ears tingle. Give the other ear a little exercise. Let it tingle too.⁹

I don’t know which is more frightening...to imagine that the call upon which you have fashioned your life is not actually from God, or that it is. But the hope that I am invested in something bigger than myself is a big part of what keeps me walking along the journey of faith. And I guess that it is at that intersection of fear and hope that I have consistently heard – and taken – the call from God.

No doubt the call comes differently to all of us. But I do believe it does come to each and every one of us – an invitation to take our place in bringing about God’s dream for the world, to be what Dr. King so famously called “co-workers with God.”¹⁰ And so the enduring question remains – will we be taking the call?

⁹ *Feasting on the Word*. Year B, Vol. 1. pp. 244, 246.

¹⁰ In *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*.