

What Are We Called to?

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Hymns: VT 545 – Here I am, Lord, 547 or 548 also

1 Samuel 3:1-18

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

² At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³ the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. ⁴ Then the LORD called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and he said, “Here I am!” ⁵ and ran to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call; lie down again.” So he went and lay down. ⁶ The LORD called again, “Samuel!” Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.” ⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸ The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹ Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰ Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” ¹¹ Then the LORD said to Samuel, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. ¹² On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³ For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. ¹⁴ Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.”

¹⁵ Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. ¹⁶ But Eli called Samuel and said, “Samuel, my son.” He said, “Here I am.” ¹⁷ Eli said, “What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.” ¹⁸ So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, “It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him.”

John 1:43-51

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ 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.” ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” ⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” ⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” ⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” ⁵⁰ Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹ 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.”

We are still in the season of long nights, the longest one still only a few weeks behind us. Many people find this time of year difficult on their mental health, with having to get up well before the sunrise, motivate ourselves to work all day, and then get home after it's already set. It is a season of darkness. I have to wonder, though, how much of our difficulties come from trying to fight this season – continuing with our busy-ness, our go-go-go mentality, our hectic schedules – rather than embracing it as a chance to slow down, reflect, change our pace to be more in step with nature. This is what Katherine May explores in her book, *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times*. In her chapter on the month of January, she speaks of a trip she took to the arctic part of Norway, to where there is a time of complete darkness. Ironically, this was supposed to be her “last hurrah” before becoming a parent! Where many would choose a warm tropical vacation or a bustling city for such a trip, she had her heart set on seeing the northern lights (something she'd never seen as a resident of the UK). So off to arctic Norway she went, pregnant and nauseous, struggling to find a warm enough coat that would fit over her baby bump.

This is how she describes what she learned upon finally seeing the aurora borealis: “Untutored, I would have assumed it was a stray emission from one of the surrounding boats, but this apparently was the aurora: pale, evanescent, but tangible in a way I hadn't expected. It wasn't an image flashed across the sky; it was an object in three dimensions, drifting slowly above our boat. ...I realized every image of the lights I had ever seen had been misleading, ... invariably sped up, the luminous greens and pinks enhanced by long exposures. ... [In reality,] They move slowly, like drifting clouds. Seeing them is an uncertain experience, almost an act of faith. You have to get your

eye in, and I honestly don't think I would ever have spotted them at all had I not been told they were there."¹ In other words, May's experience tells us that some things are only visible to us if we have learned how to watch for them, how to see in the dark.

The lectionary gives us the story of the calling of Samuel for today from 1 Samuel 3. This happens to be another narrative where the most important things happen in the dark. Now the first verse of our passage gives us an important piece of information about this particular time in the history of the ancient Israelites – it was a very uncertain time, even a time of the community being in shambles. Verse 1 says, “The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” You see, this book immediately follows the book of Judges, which is full of what Phyllis Trible calls “texts of terror”: stories of brutal violence, war, and abuse as the community fails to heed God's ways.² As commentator Alphonetta Wines puts it, “The nation was falling apart. The system of judgeships had failed miserably. With all of the chaos, how could the community possibly continue? Would it die before it began? Would the promise God made to Abraham go unfulfilled? Who would God send to begin to deal with this mess? Samuel, Israel's last judge and first prophet since Moses, is God's answer.”³

As is so often the case in the Bible, though, we are not presented with a heroic and powerful leader in his glory, as we might expect. Rather, we have a young child who hears a mysterious voice in the night and does not understand what it means. What follows is a comedy of misunderstanding, as the boy Samuel goes three times to

¹ Katherine May, *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2020), 141.

² Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Overtures to Biblical Theology Series (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

³ Alphonetta Wines, “Commentary on 1 Samuel 3:1-21,” *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/god-calls-samuel/commentary-on-1-samuel-31-21-3>

his teacher, the old priest, Eli, thinking it was he who had called him. And finally, Eli catches on to what is happening: it's one of the visions that had become so rare in those days. God is calling to the boy Samuel. Commentator Jason Byassee says, "It may take him a comedic three tries, but [Eli] does know what to do when God calls. He at least has a dim memory of when this sort of thing used to happen in this house. Tell God, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"⁴

I found two things particularly remarkable in returning to this story, one I first heard as a child myself. First, did you notice how deeply intergenerational it is? Neither the aged Eli, with his dimming sight and memory, nor the young Samuel, who does not recognize God's voice, are able to figure out this experience on their own. There is a need for both of them to work together in order for God's message to come through here. As Byassee states, Eli represents the past, "faith's yesterday," a position of honour but a lack of ability to hear God's voice. The difficult truth that "There is no future for Eli or his family," is part of God's message to Samuel. The child Samuel represents the "new generation," a renewal of faithfulness. So, "Eli needs Samuel: there is no future without him. But Samuel also needs Eli: he would still be popping out of bed and asking confused respondents, 'what do you want?' if Eli hadn't noticed that the address was emanating from another plane."⁵

The second interesting thing about this narrative is Samuel's response to his calling. Wines points out that: "Unlike Moses who resisted God's call, Samuel readily embraces his new responsibility. Perhaps living in the house of the Lord since he was

⁴ Jason Byassee, "Commentary on 1 Samuel 3:1-10," *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/second-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-1-samuel-31-10-11-20-7>

⁵ Byassee, "Commentary on 1 Samuel 3:1-10."

three years old made him readily receptive to God's call" – gave him the ears to hear what was being asked of him.⁶ Interestingly, if you look at Exodus 3 and 4, when Moses is called by God from the Burning Bush, Moses doesn't just object once, but FOUR times! Though he begins with "Here I am!" when called by name (Exodus 3:4), he goes on to protest to God that he's not the right person to send (3:11); they won't know God's name (3:13); they won't believe him (Exod. 4:1), and he's not a good public speaker (4:10). This is surprisingly unflattering behaviour for this great leader, isn't it? Samuel has no such words of protest, even though his very first task is a difficult one: he must tell Eli that he will be punished by God for allowing the abuses of power to take place in the Temple.⁷ We see this same variety of responses to God's call in the other Scripture for today, in the calling of the disciples. While Philip is immediately enthusiastic about Jesus' ministry and starts spreading the word to Nathanael, Nathanael's initial response is more like Moses'. Skeptical, he asks, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Is this Jesus guy legitimate? It is only when meeting Jesus that he 'catches' Philip's enthusiasm, declaring Jesus the Son of God and Ruler of Israel! This seems to be Samuel's attitude – having been steeped in the ways of faith throughout his upbringing, he is ready for his calling when it comes.

So, how many of us have heard voices calling in the night? Wouldn't it be simple and easy if calling were this obvious and straightforward – just a voice in the night giving us direction for our lives? Sometimes we are called this way, but more often, I'd say, God is more subtle in how God calls us. Wines tells us that this story is ultimately about

⁶ Wines, "Commentary on 1 Samuel 3:1-21."

⁷ Wines.

our calling, too, prompting us to ask, “What will you do, what will I do, what will we do, individually and collectively to answer God’s call [to love God and neighbour] in our lives?”⁸ These questions are very relevant at this particular moment in the life of this congregation. The board has been leading you in precisely these conversations: what is this congregation being called to at this time? Where is God leading you today? What are your gifts as a community? What are you being called to let go of?

These are not easy conversations. This time of discernment can feel frighteningly uncertain, and without a clear sense of what is next, it can feel like wandering aimlessly in the dark, not knowing how to look for our northern lights. At times like this, it’s tempting for us to look longingly at how things were in the past, maybe even to try to replicate the “good old days.” This is an understandable grief response, but it doesn’t speak to our calling in the here and now, in this post-pandemic world in which we now find ourselves. This narrative of Samuel’s calling speaks to this very dynamic, reminding us, as Byassee says, that, “God’s people cannot be known for our nostalgia. We must be known for our hope.”⁹

As I see it, this congregation has two major strengths: you know how to support one another, to share one another’s joys and concerns as a community. You show up for each other, lovingly and faithfully, as I have seen many times in my years here. And secondly, you are a community of multiple generations! This congregation has the largest group of children and young families of Mennonite Church Saskatchewan – a rare gift among churches of many different denominations today. So how will you use these two strengths to live into your calling as you envision the future? I don’t have any

⁸ Wines.

⁹ Byassee.

answers for these questions; that's not my place anymore. But Samuel's story reminds us that in order to be faithful to God's call in our lives, we need both memory and imagination, a looking back and a looking forward – that is, we need both the old and the young, and all those in between. As Byassee says, "Where else in our culture do people from four different generations [form] mutually dependent relationships without sharing the same last names? I've wanted to weep when I see parishioners sit together with great-grandparents or children, often unaware of what a treasure they have. God is the God of all generations, ancient and new, and God needs us all, together, to make this the world God dreams about."¹⁰ AMEN

¹⁰ Byassee.