

“Listening for God’s Call”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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I Samuel 3:1-20

All of us screen our calls and sometimes resort to blocking numbers. Otherwise, we’d waste a lot of our time on the phone with people we don’t want to listen to, who want to survey our opinion or entice us with a special deal or ask us to vote for a politician. We’re oversaturated as it is. The texts and tweets and posts and e-mails flood in relentlessly. So we filter the messages we receive and limit them to what already matters to us.

Of course, no system is foolproof. We still get tricked, from time to time, and it’s annoying, but the only viable alternative is to disconnect completely. Few if any of us want to do that, because of FOMO, Fear of Missing Out. We’re also reluctant to disconnect, even for a few hours, because our culture has decided that disconnecting now means neglecting.

I have both heard and said many times, “I’m so sorry. You called (or texted) me hours ago, and my phone was upstairs (or inside), and I was in the basement (or outside) and didn’t hear it, and didn’t check it when I went back upstairs (or inside).” In our fast-paced world, making somebody for even a few hours feels rude, and if we forget to respond, Lord have mercy the guilt we feel.

If only we felt the same sense of urgency when God calls us, but more often than not, we don’t, and there are good reasons why. Heaven does not have an area code, so it’s hard to know if it’s actually God calling to send us a message. There’s no way to know for sure. Maybe we’re just imagining things.

Sometimes, we get the message and know that it's God reaching out to us, but the message makes no sense, leaving us to wonder what God wants us to do and how he expects us to get it done. And even when the message comes across loud and clear, it can be frightening or seem ridiculous. What will people think if I answer this call from God? Will this bring trouble? How will I find the time unless I let something else go?

Fortunately, there's nothing new or unique about any of this. We have sources of guidance, including from scripture, examples that help us understand how to discern God's call and respond to it, even when that means sacrifice. Just think of poor Samuel.

Here he is, a mere boy serving in God's sanctuary under the tutelage and care of the great priest Eli. Apparently, part of Samuel's job was to spend his nights near the Ark of the Covenant, the most powerful sacred artefact in the history of the world. Imagine how terrifying that must have been, and if you can't, go home and watch the first Indiana Jones movie.

One night a voice called his name, and Samuel reasonably assumed that Eli wanted something. So he rushed to Eli's side, only for him to reply, "I did not call; lie down again." This happened a second time, then a third, and finally Eli clued in to the fact that God was calling Samuel and gave him instructions on how to respond.

Samuel returned to his station and waited. "The word of the Lord was rare in those days," scripture tells us, "visions were not widespread." So Samuel had no idea what to expect, but whatever notions he might have had were shattered when God called for a fourth time, received Samuel's response, and delivered His message. It was a dreadful judgment against Eli and his sons. God would ruin them all, because Eli's sons were corrupt and blasphemous, and Eli had not managed to restrain them.

When morning came, Eli wanted to know what God had said to Samuel, and but he was afraid. How would Eli respond to this awful news? Would he believe it, or think that Samuel was mistaken, or had made it all up? The temptation to invent something nicer, happier must have been fierce.

Eli sensing Samuel's fear, and somehow intuiting the terrible curse God had unleashed, threatened Samuel. "May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." So Samuel shared everything, and surprisingly, Eli took it in stride. "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

From that moment, Samuel became a prophet of the Lord, trusted to tell the truth, no matter what. He heard God's call, answered it, received the message, shared it under duress, and was duly rewarded with being made a prophet. That was a great blessing, a huge honor, but also an immense all-consuming responsibility often met with intense resistance when people didn't like the message a prophet conveyed.

There's so much we can learn from Samuel's situation. First, it's comforting to know that even a major figure in the Bible shared the same struggles we do. Samuel didn't realize that the voice calling him belonged to God. He thought it was Eli, but even mistakes can bear fruit, because Eli eventually discerned what was happening and helped Samuel understand how to respond faithfully. This teaches us that we need each other's help sometimes when it comes to figuring out whether the voice calling us belongs to God.

Of course, it's tempting to view Samuel as a special case. We can't relate, because God would never call someone as ordinary and normal and average as me to do anything of real importance. But God does. In fact, God calls all those who profess his name to listen, to

respond, to accept the message and share it, to exercise the power God gives to reveal who He is, what he wants, and how people can respond faithfully.

A few months ago, I spoke of how the members of our congregation hear and answer and follow God's call in many and various ways, and I am grateful and in awe of the time and energy sacrificed to God. Through ministry, we both experience and express our faith more fully, because when we sacrifice to serve, we imitate Jesus and draw closer to him and grow in faith. That's something to celebrate.

At the same time, God keeps calling, relentlessly, challenging us to respond, to take risks and make sacrifices, but sometimes we screen that call. We refuse to listen and miss the message summoning us to selfless ministry. Many of our ministries are strong, and any ministry could be stronger, but some of our ministries lack the necessary strength, because the call goes largely unanswered, for many reasons. It takes too much time. Somebody else will take care of it. I'm not the person you want. Leaders, including me, just give up inviting and encouraging people into ministry after hearing "no" a certain number of times.

This is not unique to St. Luke's. Indeed, every Christian community deals with it, except for those who don't deal with it, and those are the ones in the worst shape, the ones closest to dying or already dead, even they don't know it yet. So as uncomfortable as it is to be forthright about this issue, we cannot pretend that it doesn't exist or doesn't matter. We cannot assume that it's somebody else's problem, because we're either all in this together, or we need to reconsider what it means to call ourselves Church.

I don't mean to paint a picture of a parish in decline, for we are far from that, but I do find myself wondering what if. What if we could engage every person in ministry that's meaningful for them? What if our potential was more fully unleashed? How might people's

lives be transformed by engagement in ministry, both those who do it and those who benefit from it? What if we spent more intentional time together discerning God's call for us as a parish and for each person who's a part of it?

For a long time, I've kept these questions mostly to myself, which means that I've been looking for ways to answer those questions largely by myself. That was a mistake, and I repent of it. But for my repentance to be true, I must trust and rely on you – not just some or most, but all of you – to refine these questions, ask better ones, and find the wisest answers we can.

I need your help, because we all need each other's help, not because disaster looms around the corner, but because such awesome possibility is well within reach. God's calling us. It's urgent. The message needs to be received and shared. We're quite happy with who we are and how we are, and well we should be, but happy isn't joy, and joy is what Jesus wants for us. Joy is what Jesus wants us to share. Amen.