Second Sunday after the Epiphany—Year B
I Samuel 3:1-20
Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17
I Corinthians 6:12-20
John 1:43-51

Discerning call is a tricky thing. I can remember being in the ordination process and being asked to describe "my call" to committee after committee. It was always a weird thing to describe, and it was all too easy to fall into the trap that **call** was about *ordained ministry*, and you either had a call *or* you didn't. But that's a really, really **narrow view of call**. ***Call*** intimates that a **conversation is unfolding**, specifically, **a conversation between God and us**. And that puts is in the land of the **audacious**—***God speaking to us???***

How do you *know* it is the **legit voice of God**, and **not some other voice**? How do you **recognize that voice**? **What voices are we to heed**, and **which are we to dismiss**? And what are the **consequences of taking that voice to heart**; **what are the costs**? It gets complicated fast.

And spoiler alert…

Nobody is off the hook. This isn't an *ordained* thing, or an especially *holy person* thing, or something that *only comes to the other guy*…This is something that comes to everybody in this room whenever and however God chooses. And the more *need* there is in this world, the greater the chance that your number's going to be up.

That's where **I Samuel** starts. **The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.** And frankly the world was a hot mess. *As then, so now.*

Eli and his two sons served as priests at the sanctuary at Shiloh. And Eli's sons, **Hophni** and **Phineas**, were absolutely abusing their office as priests. They were **scoundrels**, the text tells us, and had **no regard for their priestly duties**; they **made a mockery of the sacrifices that people offered**, **stole the best parts for themselves**, **treated the offerings of the LORD with contempt,** *and* they were **laying with the women who served at the entrance of the tent of meeting**. It wasn't a good look. Eli knew it wasn't a good look. He tried to talk with them to get them to reform their ways, but to no avail.

There was a **young boy who was also ministering to the LORD—Samuel** was his name. His mother Hannah couldn't conceive, and every year, she and her husband, Elkanah, would go to offer a sacrifice at Shiloh. She made a deal that if she could just be blessed with a child that she **would offer the child for service**, and so it was that **Samuel** was conceived, born, and came to minister to the LORD under Eli's guidance.

The text tells us that **Eli's sight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see**. How true this can be. Maybe it's **old age that dims our sight** and **clouds our vision**, but maybe it's **other things** too. **What might dim our sight**, **cause us not to see things so clearly**? For Eli's sons, it was the **lure of the high life** and **power** and **excess** and **plain ol' greed**. Those things cloud the sight of a good many people to this day. But **other things** can dim our vision, too. The **pace of life**, the **sheer**

magnitude of things that **clamor for our attention**—some total **distractions**, but some of great **importance**—or the **weight of what we have always known**. ***What causes you not to see things clearly?***

Then there's **Samuel**. **Three times the LORD calls**, and **three times he runs to Eli**. What was it that **made it so hard for Samuel to accept that the LORD was calling *him***? Did he **not trust himself** because of **his youth**? Did he, de facto, assume he **didn't have enough experience**, ergo it **couldn't be God wanting to talk to *him***?

And of course, **Eli's a little slow** on the uptake too because he's **not perceiving the voice of God either**. **Three times he dismisses the boy and sends him back to bed**. And that happens. When we're in **Eli mode**, we might be **quick to dismiss** that God is speaking a word through someone because, well, **why would God use *that* person**? That's **Nathanael's** approach in today's gospel—***"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"*** **Dismiss the possibility** out of hand because of some **preconceived bias** we hold.

And from **Samuel's side**, when we **first start to accept the possibility that voices DO speak to us**, and we **start to share that with a trusted other**, it can **set us back a ways if the voice of authority says, *"Nah, go back to bed"*** with the implicit and unspoken, ***"It's all in your head."*** So, hats off to Samuel for **persevering with this mysterious voice, for staying with this nascent call**, and for **continuing to bring it to the attention of the priest**. Sometimes, we've **got to keep nagging to get others, including the church, to listen to the fact that God just might be trying to break through**.

Finally, **Eli gets that this just might be the LORD here**, and **he sent Samuel back for the fourth time** with a very specific instruction…**"Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'"** It always starts with **"Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening"**—it **did for Samuel** and **Mary had her own "Let it be with me according to your word"** moment. **Inviting God to speak, surrendering to this voice, and opening your heart to listen and receive what God is saying**, well, it can **turn your world upside down**, and **not just *your* world, but the *whole* world**. A whole lot of **transformative movements** started with **a willingness to hear what God had to say**, to **let it be conceived in one's being**, and **then to speak it into the world**, sometimes **with words**, sometimes **with action**, sometimes **simply by embodying it in your being**—because God doesn't want a word to fall to the ground.

Just saying…**it is no small thing to invite the LORD to speak.**

And we **sure don't have control over what it is that God wants us to hear and convey**. In Samuel's case, it was **infinitely bad news that he was to deliver to his beloved mentor and boss**. **Samuel was afraid to tell Eli the vision that God was about to punish Eli's house forever**. And to **Eli's credit**, he didn't bury his head in the sand; he **told Samuel not to hide anything that God had said from him**; he **wanted to know the truth**. Hard stuff—**hard for Eli** and **hard for Samuel**.

Call is that hard sometimes. We **don't always hear what we want to hear from God**. Sometimes, it's **a "no"** when we **long to hear a "yes."** Sometimes, it's **a "yes"** when we'd just as

soon hear **a "no."** Sometimes, it's **a wait** when we are **ready to take action**, and sometimes it's a **get-up-and-move-with-some-courage** when we'd be pretty content to **stay the course and not rock the boat**. God can have **all kinds of words** for us, **all kinds of calls**, and **some of them** are going to be **daggone uncomfortable**. Our job is to **keep trying to pick out the voice of the LORD *amidst* the myriad of voices** that are trying to grab our attention, and to **keep going back to the place where we first heard a trace of that call**, and to **invite God to speak with a servant's willingness to heed what God *then* says**.

Not for the faint of heart, and just as with Samuel, no prior experience required for this gig—only the willingness to listen.

There is **one other aspect of call** that shows up in the gospel passage that is so **beautiful**, and it has to do with **finding** and **inviting**.

The day *before* the encounter we hear about this morning, **John and two of his disciples were hanging out. Jesus walks by, and John exclaims, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples hear this, and follow Jesus. He turns around and asks them, "What are you looking for?" They ask him where he's staying, and he says, *"Come and see."* One of the disciples, Andrew goes and *finds* his brother Simon and tells him that they've *found* the Messiah, and then he brings Simon to Jesus.**

The **following day**, it's **Jesus' turn to do the *finding***. **He decides to go to Galilee, but first he *finds* Philip and says to him, *"Follow me."* Philip *found* Nathanael and explains that they've *found* him about whom Moses in the law and the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.** And after the little dismissive ***"Can anything good come of Nazareth?"*** detour, **Philip said to him, *"Come and see."*** And **in the *coming and seeing***, an **encounter** opens up where **Jesus can help Nathanael understand that Nathanael was *found* long before Philip called him to *come***.

There's this dance of ***following*** and ***finding and being found*** and ***coming and seeing***. In other words, part of **obedience** to **call comes in the *following*** *before* it makes any rational sense. *And sometimes*, **obedience** is about ***finding others*** and ***inviting* them** to ***come and see***, AND *other times*, **obedience** is about **allowing *yourself* to be *found*** and **trusting the voice of the one whose inviting *you*** to ***come and see***. In all these cases, it's **never about beating someone over the head** and **forcing them** to see what we see, but it's always about **honoring their process**. The **"come and see"** *opens up a space* where **Jesus can encounter *them*** on **the terms *most needed by them***. It **rarely unfolds in the way we envision** and **never on our timetable**.

At its heart, **call** is much more **intuitive** *than* it is **logical**. It is much more the **way of wisdom** *than* **following dictates or formulas**. It is much more **mystical** *than* **prescribed**. It is more **invitational** *than* **coercive**. And it is **most often worked out in community**, in **relationship with others** who are ***also* feeling their way forward**.

So…where is the voice of God calling to you?

Are you **open, receptive, and listening**, OR are you **letting others get in your head space** telling you that's **crazy talk** and **going back into a sleepstate**?

And once the **words land**, and you **take them in**, are you **speaking them back into the world as God desires**, OR are you **softening them to make them easier to swallow**?

If someone is **coming to you to sift through what they've heard God say**, are you **taking them seriously**, OR are you **responding with skepticism**?

And if they've got a **word for you that you really don't want to hear**, do you **welcome that word**, OR do you **find a way to avoid the truth that might be coming your way**?

As you **encounter Jesus**, ***who*** are ***you*** **needing to find** and **invite** to **"come and see,"** AND **who** is **reaching out *to you* sensing** that ***you*** **might be a bit lost** and ***in need*** **of being found** AND, one level deeper, **what part within you might need to be found** and **invited out of the shadows** to **come and see**?

What **shifts in us** when we **move** *from* **demanding** *to* **inviting**? And how **does our following shift** if **we understand** that **Jesus invites** *much more than* he **demands**?

Call is everywhere. *Jump in wherever these questions spark something in you.* **God** has been in conversation with this world since the beginning, and **Jesus** and the **Holy Spirit** show no signs of letting up. **Find** and **be found**, **come** and **see**, **listen** and **receive**, then **speak into this world**, with **every aspect of your lives**, **the word that God so longs to say.**

Today, **God is calling YOU**—whether you **feel timid** or **bold and brave**, with the **humility of Samuel answer**, **"Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening."** Amen.

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