

"God is Calling Our Number"

1 Samuel 3:1-10
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John 1:35-42
St. James UCC

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In our text from 1 Samuel, we're told that Samuel was serving the Lord under the direction of Eli, who was a priest serving God. We're also told that very few people received messages from the Lord and visions from God were quite rare, something quite similar to our experience today. Most people didn't have a clear experience of God speaking to them, and giving them directions that were clear and unmistakable. Rather, they were left to struggle and figure out as best they could what God's will was for their life. Very few people were told by God in no uncertain terms, "do this".

While Samuel was sleeping the Lord called out to him. Now Samuel was so confused by this, that he really didn't know what was going on. He didn't know who was calling his name, and so he assumed that it must be Eli calling out to him. (After all, Eli was the only other person there). He got up from his bed and ran in to see what Eli wanted. Eli was very puzzled. He told Samuel that he hadn't called him and sent him back to bed. Then the whole thing happened again. By the third time that it happened, Eli caught on and told Samuel to go back to bed, that it was God who was calling, and that if God called again, he should listen and respond.

How typical that encounter is! We too live in an age where God does not give many of us clear, explicit directions as to how we should live our lives. Yes, on the one hand we do have some fairly clear directions in the scriptures, but what we struggle with is that there are always gray areas. There are always places where we're not clear just what it is that God wants for us and from us.

We live in a world where many issues are very complicated, the right answers are not always obvious, and where people of good faith and intentions are often on opposite sides of the same issue. We often find ourselves in the position of trying our best to be faithful, but we aren't sure just how well we succeed, because we aren't sure exactly what God wants from us.

Sometimes, as with Samuel, even when God does call out to us, we are confused as to who it is that we're listening to. Even on those rare occasions when God is calling to us, calling us with explicit directions as to how we can be faithful, those calls are often confusing to us. They get lost in the many voices calling out around us, and we often fail to hear God's voice, or to recognize it as God's call. We get lost because of the multitude of messages that bombard us, and it's easy to miss which ones are from God.

Sometimes we miss the message because God speaks to us in unexpected ways. It can be in the smile or touch of a friend or the rustle of the wind. For Samuel it came in a voice calling out in the night. What confuses us is that God doesn't usually walk up to us and say, "Hi, can I talk with you?"

The good news in our text from Samuel is that God is persistent. When God really wants to speak to us, God keeps on trying. We might be like Samuel, where the first several times we're confused and uncertain who is calling or what it is that they want, but God keeps trying. With Samuel it took four times before he was ready to listen. Sometimes we take more than that, sometimes it takes many more than that, but God keeps on calling our number until finally we answer, until finally we stop and listen. You see, God wants our full, undivided attention, rather than is often the case, when our focus is on what we want or expect.

There was once a captain of a ship who looked out into the dark night and saw faint lights in the distance. Immediately he told his signalman to send a message: "Alter your course 10 degrees south."

Promptly a return message was received: "Alter your course 10 degrees north."

The captain was angered; his command had been ignored. So he sent a second message: "Alter your course 10 degrees south - I am the captain!"

Soon another message was received: "Alter your course 10 degrees north - I am seaman third class Jones."

Immediately the captain sent a third message, knowing the fear it would evoke: "Alter your course 10 degrees south - I am a battleship."

Then the reply came: "Alter your course 10 degrees north - I am a lighthouse."

In the midst of our dark and confusing times, all sorts of voices are calling out to us, telling us what to do, how to adjust our lives. In the midst of the darkness and confusion, one voice signals something which is often quite opposite to the rest - something that seems almost absurd. But when that voice happens to be the Light of the World, we ignore it at our peril.

In our text from John we find another example of God calling. It was when Jesus called some of His disciples to follow Him. They were already looking for the Messiah. They were ready to follow Him, and so when John the Baptist told a couple of them that Jesus was the Lamb of God, they didn't need any extra convincing. They started following Jesus to see for themselves if He was the One, and when He invited them, they just kept on following. One of them was Andrew who not only followed Jesus, but in his excitement, went and recruited his brother Simon to follow as well.

Now the scriptures only describe what happens in the sketchiest of terms. What is clear is that Jesus calls the disciples. They are convinced that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the one whom they have been looking for, and so they follow. They don't need a great

deal of convincing. They just need to hear the call and to know that the one calling is the one they have been waiting for.

In some ways we're like those disciples. In coming here to worship today, in being actively involved in this church, and in a variety of other ways we have said that we want to follow God. That is something that is important to each of us. If only Jesus would walk up to us and say clearly "I want you to do this", we would be so relieved. We would know what to do. The uncertainty, the struggles to make the right choice would all be taken away (or would they?)

If only God's call would come to us in a way that was clear and certain, with no room for doubt, then we would know how to respond. Then we would know what to do.

At least it's nice to imagine that we'd know what to do, but I suspect that reality is far more ambiguous than the picture we've just imagined. Even Jesus' disciples were often confused and uncertain. They had Jesus right there, answering their questions, explaining what they should do, and still there was much that was ambiguous, much that was uncertain, many times when they still did the wrong thing. As best I can tell, following God has never been a task that has removed all responsibility for us to struggle with what it is God wants and what really is the best way, the most faithful way for us to live. That seems to always be an issue for those who would follow Christ.

At the same time we're reminded in the example of Samuel, that part of our problem is that there are times when God calls us and we fail to understand what is going on. There are times and places in our lives when God offers us direction and counsel and we miss it, because we don't know or trust that it is God who is calling. In the midst of the many voices calling out in our lives, each of which has their own set of priorities and concerns, each of which has it's own set of advice - in the midst of all of that clamoring, there are many times when we aren't sure which voice is God's or even if God's voice is calling out at all.

Yet life doesn't stop because we're uncertain. We still face decisions and choices and the need to live today even though we may not hear God clearly calling.

In the midst of that uncertainty, one thing that we can trust is that God is persistent. God will keep calling. We may be unsure, we may not be listening, but God will keep calling our number, until finally we hear. God doesn't quit calling. God doesn't give up on us, even when we're not listening, God keeps calling our number.

Since God keeps calling, we have a responsibility to be just as persistent in our listening. When we listen and don't hear, when we're uncertain and unsure of just what it is that God wants, we still need to listen. When we feel like God is ignoring us and we don't know where to turn or how to proceed, we need to listen even harder, for the likelihood is that God is calling, we just aren't hearing.

Sometimes, like with Samuel, God speaks to us in unexpected ways and unexpected times and places. We need to listen carefully for God in places and ways that we least expect, for God does not speak to us only in the ways that we choose or look for or seek. God also speaks to us in ways that surprise us.

Before we can call someone on the telephone, we need to find out their number. Well God already knows our number. In fact, God has us on speed dial, and God is calling for us to follow and to be faithful today and for all the days to come.

Amen.