

News From Our Forebears: The Calling Voice *I Samuel 3:1-9*

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We've been looking at a number of the major heroes of the Old Testament in this summer preaching series, and before this series is over, we will look at some more. But today, as we ponder the business of our congregational meeting later, I'm going to do something a little different from what I initially thought of doing when this series got conceived. Instead of focusing upon another character today—someone like Abraham or Isaac or Jacob or Rebekah or Moses or Ruth or any of the others—I'm going to focus upon a Presence Who has been there with all of these characters, of course, and Who, I believe, is with us still. We know that One not so much as a flesh-and-bones person who lives and dwells in a specific time and place, who is born and goes somewhere special and does something faithful and eventually dies and is buried; but rather as a Voice Who is forever calling people into a relationship and onto a path. In fact, this Voice is what makes these forebears of ours noteworthy. They really aren't that remarkable all by themselves, but are passed down to us as ancestors in the faith simply because they more or less listened to that Voice—entertained the possibilities that Voice promised, and allowed themselves, more or less, to be empowered by it. And so today, it is that Voice, that Calling Voice, that captures my attention.

To begin with, naturally, we should acknowledge that there are many voices out there that often capture our attention. Voices are calling to us all the time, as a matter of fact—voices at work, voices at home, voices in commercials, voices that ring out from billboards or shop windows, little voices inside of us that continue the harangues of critical parents long after their literal voices are silenced. Some voices tell us that the secret to our real selves can be found in this or that exercise program or diet or diploma or vacation package. And the truth is that it's hard to always know which voice is the Calling Voice, the Voice of God, rather than of, say, societal norms or self-interest or one's own inflated ego.

Christians speak of "vocation," which comes from the Latin word "vocare," which means "to call"; and the notion of looking at each of our lives as a kind of calling seems to just roll off the lips of a Martin Luther or a John Calvin when they write about vocation, but we all know, from various painful junctures in our lives, that this is not always as easy as it sounds.

Callings, after all, are often disruptive and invasive and destabilizing, requiring one, if one heeds them, to take the world that is so delightful and settled and filled with its own kind of satisfaction and promise and to just shake it like a blanket, until something else that is entirely different emerges and comes together. Why would any sane person willingly invite that kind of chaos into their life, unless they had discerned that Calling Voice? And how precisely is that Voice discerned?

There are a lot of people out there—so many, in fact, that I am genuinely surprised by their number—who have just a general reverence for preachers that we preachers, for the most part, absolutely do not deserve. Don't ask me why this is the case that there is such reverence; it just is. And while they look at their own vocational lives in terms

of getting jobs and pursuing careers and accepting promotions, they make the innocent and altogether trusting assumption that we preachers do it completely differently—that in one case it's a job, and in the other case it's a call! And that the call is always dramatic! I'm sitting at a red-light one day, perhaps, and I see the face of Jesus in a bowl of spaghetti on a sign in front of a restaurant, and I know, from that encounter, that I'm being called unmistakably and unarguably from one thing to another. And so—boom!—we preachers go off and we do that new thing; and that's a call. The rest of the world has jobs, but we preachers have a calling. But that is just bunk!

This past week, I got an e-mail from a man who calls himself an evangelist. He wrote me and said, "Pastor Wardlaw, God has called me to begin a prayer-partner relationship with you. God has laid your name on my heart. God has told me to make an appointment with you, to pray with you, to fast with you, and to lay upon your heart several financial burdens which my evangelistic ministry is now suffering." He wants money, but he put it in terms of a call from God! I am suspicious of such things.

I have never personally received a call from God like that. In fact, Presbyterian that I am, I would be innately resistant to a call like that. We Presbyterians talk about the vocation that is at the root of every life, whether you're a preacher or a lawyer or a teacher or a doctor or a butcher or a baker or a candlestick maker. We leave open the possibility that everything worth doing, if it somehow involves your deepest joy and something the world needs, is a calling. Moreover, we talk about a call in terms of three parties, essentially. A call begins with God, for sure; and the call is perceived in some form within one's own heart, for sure; and—here's the one that I love and respect the most—the call is validated, or not, by God's people. I may tell you that my heart has been strangely warmed and that I've been called to be a minister, but your job as the people of God is to listen, too, for that Calling Voice. After all, my heart being strangely warmed could be the Voice of God, or it could be the pizza that I had the night before; and you have got to discern and validate that call. That's your job! It's called "the approbation of God's people," and we are right in our tradition to speak of the call in terms of those parties: God the Calling One, and then the one who is called, and finally the people who hear and validate, and often mediate, that call.

Yes, *mediate* the call. Interpret it to the one being called. Speaking for myself, I have more often than not discerned the call of God *first* as I have heard it through that kind of mediation.

This must be why I love this text so much from I Samuel. Samuel—prayed for so long by Hannah, whom everyone presumed was barren. Hannah was a pious woman, and she prayed and prayed for a child, and then, when God answered her prayer and Samuel was born, she took him, when he was weaned, to the tabernacle in Shiloh and turned him over to Eli the priest that he might be raised there as a servant in the Lord's house. Maybe she hadn't noticed how things in the tabernacle weren't exactly as they used to be. Eli, after all, was a feeble old man, a bit dissipated—the last gasp, really, of a failed priestly order that had exhausted its authority and its credibility. She probably didn't notice any of that; she just wanted her son to be an apprentice in the house of the Lord.

But our text captures the mood of things: "the word of the Lord was rare in those days," it says; "visions were not widespread." The Calling Voice was not discerned very often—not even by the clergy.

In our text, though, when the Calling Voice said, "Samuel!" and Samuel ran to Eli

and said, “Yes, what’s up?”—not once, not twice, but three times!—even old, dissipated Eli sensed and validated that Voice. He said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” Not even Eli was so old or so distracted that he could not recognize the holy voice that intrudes where it is least expected. He validated and mediated that Calling Voice to Samuel, so that Samuel was finally able to discern it for himself, and to be alert and obedient to it. Ultimately, Samuel went on to become the spiritual leader of his people for over forty years, and there is no figure in all of the Old Testament about whom fewer negative things are said than Samuel. And how did it all begin? It began with a Calling Voice interpreted to him by another.

Speaking for myself, I have more often than not discerned the call of God first as I have heard it interpreted to me through that kind of mediation. So, it has been for me that the Calling Voice has more often than not been delivered through the accents and inflections of voices like yours.

Thirteen years ago now, the phone rang one Monday at our home on Long Island, and the voice on the other end captured me immediately. Kay and I came home late one night this week, by the way, and listened to a piece of voicemail from that same voice, and she said, “Aren’t we going to miss that wonderful voice?” And I said, “Yes.” It was the voice of Tony Amos, and thirteen years ago, when I heard that voice for the first time, it intrigued me so because it sounded to me so much like the voice of Jimmy Carter. I didn’t hear any voices like that on Long Island, and for months—long before I saw the face, long before I shook the right hand that goes with that voice—I had hours and hours of phone conversations with nothing but that voice. Tony was chairing a Pastor Nominating Committee from this church, and quite some while before the Calling Voice invaded my being and persuaded me that it was God’s will for us to come to Atlanta and to Central, it was Tony’s voice that kept encouraging me to listen for that other voice, that Calling Voice. And, truth be known, those two voices are so intertwined in my head that I don’t know, not even to this day, where one voice stopped and the other voice started.

And, there were yet more voices on that wonderful committee: the voice of Ann Hunter, our Clerk of Session; and the voice of Don Robinson, and of Wade Boggs, and of Gayle Gellerstedt, and of Margaret Montgomery, and of Bill Drath, God rest his soul. You’ve never heard a better demonstration of the approbation of God’s people, than in the way, over some time, these voices mediated to me and to Kay the Calling Voice, the voice of God. And then, by the grace of God, we came here and, for so long in your midst, have had the unspeakable pleasure of noting the innumerable ways in which your voices, too—in praise, and in worship, and in study, and in the faithful formation of others, and in the shepherding of the sick and the dying, and sometimes, literally, in the streets when some important justice issue is at stake—have urged the world, the way Eli urged Samuel, to listen with alertness for the clarion urgency of God’s voice. How else does anybody hear the voice of God, if not, in the main, through the accents and inflections of voices like yours?

And now let me tell you how, in recent months, Kay and I have heard that voice again through what are primarily Texas accents and inflections. As near as I can tell, by the way, only a few of you have any affinity at all for those particular accents and inflections. Isn’t it funny, how bullish we all are on our own regions of choice? The church on Long Island, for example, in calling us there, in its own self-importance, felt

that it had lifted us Southerners from abject deprivation to the navel of the universe by asking me to be the first Southerner to pastor that church in its 330 year history. And when, after far too few years there, I announced that we were feeling called to Atlanta, most of them turned their noses up and said, “Atlanta? Have you lost your mind?” I hadn’t thought much more about that until lately when I’ve heard so many of you say, “Texas! Have you lost your mind?” As if I’m not scared enough about going there, some of you’ve pointed out the rattlesnakes and the dead armadillos on the side of the road, and the conservative politics, and all the rest. Some of you have been kind enough to say, “Well, if you have to live in Texas, it’s best, I guess, to live in Austin.” Just last Sunday, while walking together to the parking garage, Dean Hammond said to me, “You do know that it’s hot there, don’t you?” I said, “Yes, I have heard that, Dean, but thanks for reminding me.”

Why would we leave Atlanta, why would we leave this church that we all love dearly, why would we leave friends and a comfortable life and a house and neighborhood that we adore, and a future here, were it not for that Calling Voice?

And, once again, I have heard that voice as it has been mediated to me through the persistent confidence of the presidential search committee at Austin Seminary. In the short time, really, that we’ve been in conversation, they have done their job well in laying out for me the picture of the seminary—with its challenges and with its strengths and with its promise—and they have made clear to me that they are looking for bold, visionary leadership. They want someone who can help inspire and shape new generations of ministers. They have also been clear that, whenever a seminary presidency comes open in our dear church in these days, the stakes are high, and every political force out there in the greater church waits carefully to see what directions will be chosen. The committee in Austin believes that I can be a bridge-builder in a climate that is often polarized, just as our national church in general is polarized, and that if these bridges can be built, it will benefit not just the seminary but also its larger constituency in and beyond the Southwest, and maybe it will be a model for the rest of the church. I have been compelled by that vision and by their warm, confident, and trustworthy voices. Even in the midst of sadness at the thought of leaving you—which shows itself in a perpetual lump that stays in my throat these days—I am excited, too, over the possibilities of what can happen there in Austin.

And I am plenty scared. Beverly Gaventa, a professor at Princeton Seminary and a friend of mine, told me that if I were not scared, I would be insane. It’s not just that I’m about to exchange the rhythms of the parish ministry, which I know so well and have practiced for twenty-four years, for a whole new set of rhythms that are still pretty strange to me at this point. It’s also, in the main, that I am stepping out of the context of a healthy, self-aware, affirming, and celebrative community of faith—a model, in fact, for a host of churches throughout this country—and into what is often a national arena in which the conflicts and fears and neuroses that afflict our greater church are in far greater evidence. I have been rattled, frankly, by what’s at stake these days in the greater church when a seminary president is chosen. Many voices react with enthusiasm and affirmation, but other voices, too, react with howls of protest. I’ve been rattled by that.

In fact, I was so rattled that, a few weeks ago on a Wednesday morning—between the Friday when I had called to accept the offer and the Monday when the seminary board was to meet in a special called session to elect me (the Monday right before the

Tuesday when I called the Session meeting that initiated the congregational meeting we will have shortly)—on that Wednesday morning, I phoned the chair of the search committee to tell him I was having second thoughts and wanted out. Aware of all the negative voices around this call—the ones for real and ones in my mind—I told him that I wasn't sure that this was really God's idea. I told him they could find a better "bridge person" in that arena than I could be. I told him that in the act of saying "Yes," I was beginning to consider if it was becoming clear to me that I should have said "No." I told him that I feared that I was walking into an ambush where I could get clobbered by folks in various churches in that constituency who were not at all enthusiastic about my leadership. I was calling to "unring the bell," I said.

When I finished speaking to him, I had no idea how he was going to react, this Presbyterian elder from Austin. He was a lawyer, after all, and a former state senator and a former university president and the Dean Emeritus of the L.B.J. School of Public Policy. A pretty high-powered guy. Maybe he was going to tell me I was crazy. Maybe he was going to remind me that board members had gone to considerable expense to get to this meeting next Monday—some of them chartering planes, even, from vacation spots. Maybe he was going to accept what I had said and simply write me off as someone not up for the job if I were having doubts like that.

But do you know that he did instead? He said, "I know just how you feel." He said, "I've been thinking about how you must be feeling this way." And then he began talking about the call that he and others had sensed already. He reviewed all of that at some length, he talked about the times of uncertainty in his life, he hearkened back to the wisdom of his mother and to things she had said to him when, as a child, he was scared; and, before he finished talking, he read to me a verse from Isaiah: "Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint." In that moment of fear and indecision, he was a kind of Eli for me; and as I listened to his voice, I heard more clearly than before the Calling Voice—the voice of God. That, in the main, is the way that Calling Voice has most often been imparted to me.

My dear friend Michael Lindvall, whom many of you know and who has preached and taught here on a couple of occasions, is moving this summer from Ann Arbor to New York City where he will become pastor of The Brick Presbyterian Church. We've been soul mates over these last weeks. Michael says that, time and again, he has reflected on that refrain in the hymn, "Here I Am Lord" (a hymn, by the way, that he doesn't particularly care for; it reminds him too much of a bad Broadway show tune). But he loves the refrain: "Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night...." It's that part—"calling in the night"—that has come alive for him in a new way in these last weeks and months. He's finally come to understand that "calling in the night" in a new way; not so much as an unmistakable calling, any more than it was unmistakable to Samuel, but as something in the night that kept him awake just as it kept Samuel awake, and restless, and unsettled, really, until his own Eli could help interpret it for him. Michael's experience has been my experience—tossing and turning in the night while this call got into my hair like bubble gum.

And now, in the weeks and months ahead, you, also, will have fresh encounters with that Calling Voice. For just as surely as that Voice is calling me to Texas, it is also calling someone else here—someone for whom, eventually, many of you will serve as Eli's; and whom you will eventually privilege with the stewardship and legacy

and great future of this congregation.

A number of you have said to me over the last week or so, “How can we possibly go on without you? How can Central possibly be Central without you?” This is enormously flattering, but also preposterous. There may be a dark little voice lurking somewhere in the heart of every pastor, which secretly nurtures the hope that, upon every pastoral departure, the place will just decide to fold up and people will say, “Well, if he’s leaving, then so am I.” But there’s nothing faithful about that, nothing at all. So, in these months ahead, I want to say “Every hand on deck!” This church is almost 150 years old; you know exactly who you are and why you’re here; you’re a flagship in the presbytery and in the city and a “scout ship,” as Randy Taylor used to say, in the denomination. You are blessed with boatloads of leadership and resources and young people and children and the wise perspective of age and memory, and a lively tradition. The best thing you’ve got going for you is who you are right now.

And, of course, one more thing, too—a Calling Voice. A Voice which summoned you into being, which has led you faithfully in the past and which will surely lead you purposefully into the days ahead. A Voice which beckoned each one of you here, and encouraged you to claim this as your spiritual home. Listen for that Voice, and for the voices of others who, perhaps, like Eli, can help you listen more effectively; and then make yourselves ready to follow where that Voice leads.