

What God Does: Calling

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on 1 Samuel 3:1-20
on January 14, 2018 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

On this special day where we commission the 34 women and men who have said 'yes' when asked to serve again in the role of deacon, and where we ordain the five men and women who have said 'here I am' to God when called by God into servant leadership, the word I believe God wants us to hear today is part-sermon for us all, part-charge to the Deacons. It's not every day that a church has the honor to ordain five new deacons! So in that spirit, I offer for our consideration today "Five Lessons on Calling" — and specifically how God calls us! — that we hear in our lectionary readings today.

1. God's call transcends the barriers that we construct and uphold.

Joy, Annice, Kim, Sheree, and Mitch, you might be thinking to yourself — how in the world did God choose ME for such a task? Wouldn't someone else be better suited or more faithful? She knows her Bible far better than I do, he definitely has a better way with language in a crisis situation, she is a stronger leader than I am, and he actually understands Robert's Rules of Order! Why me?!

It seems that in our most base and fearful nature, we can see someone - anyone - even ourselves - and think them unworthy of God's calling. Without even realizing it, we assign limitations on who can be called by God to specific avenues of service, valuing certain contributions

or demographics over others. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" we say. And yet, that we all are here this day should serve as indication that God calls indiscriminately! An aged barren couple, a frightened boy, a teenaged girl, an angry prophet, a slave, a zealot — all very human people called by God for a divine purpose. So if the divine summons can fall upon Abraham and Sarah, Samuel, Esther, Jonah, Mary, or Paul, it can fall upon Joy, Annice, Kim, Sheree, and Mitch, it can fall upon me, and it can fall upon each and every one of you!

Because in so doing, God claims us first as beloved, as made in the image of God in even our mother's womb, as worthy of carrying this divine spark of good news into the world. When the call of God takes hold, might we nevertheless persist in sharing it with the world!

2. God's call often catches us off guard in ways we aren't expecting.

The King James Version called it "a still small voice." Howard Thurman called it "the sound of the genuine."¹ And Samuel was up and down three times that night, thinking the one that called his name was none other than Eli! Story after story in our holy scriptures describe for us the call of God. Sometimes, God calls through someone or something so fantastical, we can't help but noticing the bush in flames right in front of our eyes. And other times, God's call is practically imperceptible to our very being.

¹ <http://www.dailygood.org/story/1846/the-sound-of-the-genuine-howard-thurman/>

I'm sure I'm not the only one in here who has experienced a holy beckoning so real and commanding we cannot ignore it. Perhaps for you, it was a call into or out of a relationship. Maybe it was a call to a particular kind of work, or vocation, or community. It could be a call towards something or away from something else. The invitation for you might have felt optional or compulsory; it may have surprised you or hit you in the proverbial face! But I think God's call is an experience that all will encounter at some point, in some way, for some time.

Deacons, we give thanks that you have heard the call of God to serve, even if it was a call you had to strain your ears to hear. We pray that this is not the last time God beckons you into a holy adventure!

3. God does not expect you to hear and respond to a divine call all by yourself.

I've always loved that the story of God's call to Samuel really is a story of Samuel *and* Eli! Samuel, whose name literally means 'God has heard', hears God that night in the temple, but confuses the divine voice with that of his mentor Eli. And after several mistaken hearings, Eli, whose name derives from the word for 'my God', finally awakens from an eyesight grown dim and a spiritual sight that had darkened.² Together, they are able to discern that this is no ordinary voice, because it is God

² Lawrence Wood, "1 Samuel 3:1-20," *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*, p245.

calling Samuel. "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening!" becomes the prepared response.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us: "Sometimes those calls [from God] ring clear as bells and sometimes they are barely audible, but in any case we are not meant to hear them all by ourselves. It was part of God's genius to incorporate us as one body, so that our ears have other ears, other eyes, minds, hearts, and voices to help us interpret what we've heard."³

Deacons, God has not called you by your lonesome into this work of ministry. Even though the title may sound impressive in some circles, "deacon" does not mean "I'm supposed to know everything!," nor does it mean "I have lots of power on my own!" There will be times when your ministry as Deacons will ask you to respond individually — solitary visits in a hospital room, one-on-one conversations about our church with a fellow member — but God has not called you to stand alone as a deacon. Rather, it is through sharing in God's call that we can hear it, by living in beloved community with one another that we can receive it. So take heart! You are not alone, for God's sake!

4. Oftentimes, God's call to you asks first for a simple response.

I read an article this week in *The Atlantic* entitled "How It Became Normal to Ignore Texts and Emails" with the subheading: "digital

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, p23-24.

messages mimic the speed of real conversation, but often what people like best is the ability to put them off." "The defining feature of a conversation is the expectation of a response," the article begins, but while the advent of technology has sped up the capacity and method by which conversations are held quickly (Email! Texts! Instant messages! Phones in your pocket!), it has become normal to resist the compulsion of responding promptly to any message they receive. A choice quote was revealing: "More than anything, what the age of instant communication has enabled is the ability to deal with conversation on our own terms. We can respond right away, we can put it off for two days, or never get around to it at all. We can manage several different conversations at once. As these things become normal, it creates an environment where we are only comfortable asking for slivers of people's distracted time, lest they ever obligate us to give them our full and undivided attention."⁴

Now I know that our Deacons will be reading every word of every email they ever receive from the church! But given that this is increasingly descriptive of the state of our capacity for interpersonal dialogue, it's not all that hard to imagine that we could hear a call or a tug from God and just ignore it like we have those emails just sitting without response in our inboxes. Sure, we may listen in long enough to remove the proverbial red

⁴ Julie Beck, "How It Became Normal to Ignore Texts and Emails," *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/01/ignoring-each-other-in-the-age-of-instant-communication/550325/>.

circle from our device's notification, but would we do anything with it? Would we allow a call from God to wither in the midst of our distracted minds, 'lest God ever obligate us to give God our full and undivided attention?'

There are plenty in our scriptures and Christian history whose response to God's call was to ignore it or even to run the other way! But Samuel's response was pure and simple — he listened and responded as such. Yes, it took the eyes and ears of Eli to understand it, but Samuel models for us as people of faith, Deacons or not, how to respond to God's call. Jesus says it just as plainly — "follow me," "come and see." Our responsibility is to resist the temptation to ignore it out of fear or anxiety, but rather to respond with excitement for what we might experience.

5. God's call usually demands that we share a message or live in such a way that defies the particular world around us.

The lectionary reading for today's story of Samuel and Eli offers ministers and worship planners a shortcut, a cropping of the text after just 10 verses instead of the full 20, probably for those worried about worship running long and getting their people out in time to beat the Methodists to the cafeteria. Were we to isolate those first ten verses and use it to catch a glimpse into how God calls, we would have a nice story of a young boy and his older mentor, who together share sight and sound to understand a summons from God. But if we keep reading, we hear the actual *message* God gives to Samuel, one that is filled with

disappointment in Eli and his family and harsh justice for their future. Can you imagine what had to have raced through young Samuel's mind as he 'laid there until morning... afraid to tell the vision to Eli'? Can you feel the lurching of his stomach, a mouth that feels like sandpaper, palms and brow damp with nerves, terrified to pass along such definitive and final judgment *on behalf of God* to this one who meant so much to him? Surely the questions flooded Samuel's mind, many that boiled down to wondering if Eli will still love him after this.

We must remember, though, that God didn't call Samuel in isolation, called in some general way to be vaguely spiritual to those around him. No, God called Samuel in a specific time and place, a time of "spiritual desolation, religious corruption, political danger, and social upheaval."⁵ The text reminds us that "the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." Leadership of Israel was unraveling, and the pressures to just find a king — any king will do! — were substantial. Into this particular circumstance, God called Samuel particularly!

Take merely a cursory glance at God's prophets and priests throughout the generations since Samuel and Eli, and you'll recognize the way that God called each for their time and place. Into a world who would scoff at the testimony of a teenage girl, God called Mary to bear the holy babe. Into a world who would turn their hoses upon him, condemn him,

⁵ Bruce C. Birch, "1 Samuel 3:1-4:1a," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary: Volume 2*, p994.

arrest him, and take his life, God called Dr. King to summon the deepest justice to roll down like waters for all God's beloved children, and righteous like an ever-flowing stream where all find life.

Deacons, you have been called by God for the sake of God in this specific moment. For such a time as this, you have been summoned into servant leadership of God's church and the world God so fully loves. For such a time as this, we the church are asking you to lead us. Lead us by seeing and serving those who are too easily overlooked; lead us as we heed the call of God into the heart of the city outside our doors; lead us as we experience seismic shifts in culture, place, space, ministry, identity, and vision; lead us as we are ever more fully becoming who God would have us to be. For such a time as this, we who follow in the way of Jesus are asking you to lead us. Lead us in word and deed to live as Jesus did — loving God and neighbor and even our enemies, turning away from lives that store up the things of this world so that we can instead store up treasures far more timeless and worthwhile, lifting up those on the margins and not letting off the hook those who do the marginalizing. The message you may have for us might disrupt, unsettle, or upend, but we trust you because we trust God. Lead us to live in love, for this particular moment demands nothing less.

We give thanks that you have heard and heeded the call; now will you help us hear our own?

Amen!