

How is God Speaking to Us?
A Sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – January 17, 2021

Please Read:
John 1:43-51
I Samuel 3:1-10

Today I invite you to reflect on how God “speaks” to you? How do you respond? It's a timely topic as we consider the power of words in our society, and how we discern what God is speaking into our world. Perhaps most importantly, how do we discern and respond to God's call as we move forward as a nation in these turbulent times? I suggest that God speaks to us in a way that should always raise up our awareness that we are *beloved*, but also that we are called to be a part of what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called “*beloved community*.”

Both of our lessons point to the surprising fact that God does not go to the obvious choices, but freely calls *all* kinds of people into relationship and a journey of transformation and reformation.

In our I Samuel lesson, God chose to speak to the temple *servant* Samuel, rather than the temple *priest*, Eli! As a boy, the adopted son of a priest, young Samuel spent a great deal of time around the temple. Samuel helped old Eli. The priest's eyes were growing dim and he could use the boy to fetch things for him.

Little Samuel, as it turns out, was who God used to establish the monarchy of Israel, anointing both Saul and David, Israel's first two kings. More than anyone else, Samuel provided for covenant continuity in a time of change from the leadership of judges to kings.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus calls a couple of ordinary and anonymous men, Philip and Nathanael, to follow and help change the world for all time. Jesus did not want to try and do things alone, but rather called forth people just like us in order to form a community through which his agenda would be realized.

Philip was probably a fisherman, coming from the town Bethsaida, which means "house of fishing." Nathanael is a disciple we really don't know much about. It's interesting to note that Nathanael is not mentioned in Matthew, Mark, or Luke... only in John. I don't want to make too much of this, but Nathanael was a skeptic who asked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” I think Jesus liked that about Nathanael. Nathanael, spoke his mind. And while Jesus impressed Nathanael by remembering him, Jesus says to Nathanael that he will see what the Kingdom of God is really about in Jesus...

The point is, all of Jesus' disciples were common, ordinary folk, called by Jesus to an uncommon, extraordinary new life. Jesus says that he will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Remember that the word angel simply means “messenger.” I think anyone who bears witness to the way of Christ is a messenger, an intermediary between the way the world is and the way it should be in the eyes of God.

The fact that God calls people like Philip and Nathanael should not surprise us, for God throughout history has called into being great leaders from among the most unlikely people. Moses, Jacob, David, Mary, Magdalene, Peter. The list goes on...

The record is clear on who God calls to follow. God desires to transform the world through people like you and me. It's been said that God is not so interested in our *natural ability* as is in our *divine availability*. The Apostle Paul wrote, "God purposely chose what the world considers nonsense in order to shame the wise, and God chose what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful... "

So, the question is not so much *who* is chosen, but *how* do we hear God speaking to us? ... How do *you* hear God's "call"? *How* does God call you? We should remember that there are *general* callings and *specific* callings. As Christians, for example, we are all generally called by Jesus to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to love our enemies... Then there are specific callings in life where God gifts and opens doors for some to be scientists and teachers, doctors and musicians, bankers, and financiers, craftspersons and artists, etc....

We Presbyterians believe in *the priesthood of all believers* which means that we can glorify God, we can mediate God's truth, goodness and beauty, in any career path we may pursue. There is a variety of ways in which the Lord "calls" us, and I believe there is a real freedom in what career path we may follow. The point is, we follow our career path following the way of Jesus.

In our reformed tradition, we believe that God calls us *through the voice of the community*. It's through key relationships that God often speaks to us. I was first surprised by Lucy Cayton, after a youth Sunday at Calvin Presbyterian Church as a HS senior, when she said to me point blank, "You should consider the ministry." I tried to ignore her. I had other plans. I was set on Medicine.

I love the story of Samuel, because I think I heard God's calling a few times, but went back to sleep at least a few times as well before I paid attention! I heard God speak to me in China through the underground church. I heard God speak to me while working for the government in Japan... I heard God through a song that Victoria chose.

I also heard God speak to me through Cal Chin, a seminary professor who said, Scott, before you consider seminary, make sure you explore any other interests you may have first... And I identify with the Jewish writer who quipped, "I know we're the chosen people, but couldn't God choose somebody else once in a while?"

God is patient and persevering. God calls us forward to new life *constantly!* In both of today's lessons there is a clear audible calling, but in other instances God speaks indirectly through dreams, visions, when prophets, evangelists, preachers, or teachers speak, or in the still small voice that plants God's word in our hearts, minds, and soul over a cup of coffee with a friend or during quiet contemplation...

God lit up a bush for Moses. God swallowed Jonah in the big fish. God called the apostle Paul while he was on the road doing just the opposite of what God wanted him to do! In the gospel text today, Philip simply says with excitement to his friend, "Come and see!" but in Acts, Philip uses scholarly exegesis to call the Ethiopian Eunuch to new life. In other words, God's methodology of speaking into our lives is of an infinite creative variety.

In the O.T. passage, the writer comments "the word of the Lord was rare in those days." Safe from disruptive, challenging words of God, people could show up at

the temple now and then, go through a few prescribed rituals, and feel better about themselves. That was all. Old Eli tottered about the temple, going through the motions, keeping the altar fires lit during a time when "the word of God was rare."

Into this situation of settled, routine religion, one night little Samuel hears his name called. He doesn't understand at first. But finally, wise Eli told the boy, if you hear the voice again, say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Which brings us to another obvious question: *Are you listening?* The story does not say that Samuel went back to a peaceful sleep. To hear God requires attentive listening. It requires work to hear and discern God's voice. Sometimes, we have to wrestle in "the dark night of the soul."

I wonder if God hasn't been trying to speak to us through larger events in our society of late. In our deafness, I wonder if God isn't speaking a prophetic word through the *Black Lives Matters* demonstrations. To read through the long list of names like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, Dion Johnson... These names remind us there is still much work to be done to realize the inclusiveness of the Beloved Community God intends.

Sometimes we need to shut out other voices to hear God's voice. The voice that says there is no God to hear... or the voice of those who say there is no future, that says you are not loved, or not good enough, or too old, or too young, not beautiful, or smart enough, that you just don't have what it takes... Yes, we have many voices to mute out before we can discern the Word of God to us.

It's interesting that we are in a time when social media giants are silencing certain voices. I can tell you for sure I never want to see a confederate flag carried through the halls of our congress again! I don't want to hear the voice of racial slurs or dog whistles that ignite the passions of those who would demonize those who are different... I don't want to hear the voice that tears down and condemns the "other."

In fact, God speaks to us through what's going on in the news... Surely, God wants followers of Jesus to pay attention to the politics of our day... For example, is there a connection between the fact that Kamala Harris is the first woman of color to be the Vice President of our country... and the ugly threats of violence around the country? I hear God calling Christians to take a stand for love, and as Cornell West said, "justice is what love looks like in public."

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys. The aftermath of the 'fight with fire' method ... is bitterness and chaos, the aftermath of the love method is reconciliation and creation of the beloved community. Physical force can repress, restrain, coerce, destroy, but it cannot create and organize anything permanent; only love can do that. Yes, love—which means understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill, even for one's enemies...."¹

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., 1957.

That's why we honor Dr. King. We want to find a way forward for healing systemic racism in our country? Love is the way. We want to find a way forward after Inauguration Day where we can work toward a more perfect union in our land? Love is the way. We want to find a way to bring greater economic support for the poor and hungry in this country? Love is the way. We want to find a way to bring hope to those who have lost everything in the pandemic? Love is the way...

You get the picture. When you hear Jesus saying, "Follow me," it will be to his way of loving that *centers the other*. Jesus always calls us to creative and self-giving love. Easy to hear, much harder to obey. As Mark Labberton writes in his book, *Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus*, "In the end, call is about continuous formation in the likeness of Jesus Christ far more than it is about finding direction or getting a job. 'Strive first for the kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well...'"²

Tomorrow we remember and celebrate the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I would encourage you to take time to join the service tomorrow morning. One of the ways I believe God speaks to us is through voices from a different perspective. It is through hearing uncomfortable truth from others that I can learn to think and act in more life-giving ways. Read a book, watch a movie, ask a friend from the African American community to share their story. And learn how deep, how high, how broad, and wide is God's Beloved Community.

One last point: After Samuel's night of listening for God to speak, Eli woke up, and wanted to know what God said. Samuel tells what he heard. Things won't go on the same as before. Eli will fall; young Samuel will rise. It reminds you of other Bible stories about people whose lives are moving along in conventional, predictable paths, only to be disrupted by an intrusive word... to hear God's call and have their world changed.

Friends, if you're like me, like young Samuel it may take God a few times to get your attention. But when you hear the call of the Lord... to be a messenger, to serve, to love, forgive, repent, to trust more completely, to pray, to study, to be still, to use your gifts for ministry... or as a church, to do justice, to love kindness and walk more humbly with our God, to be more unified, more welcoming to those hurting and broken in this lost and indifferent world... whatever the call may be, when it is from God, *we must listen and respond*. And we will see God speaking over us that we are beloved, and as we are changed more into the likeness of Jesus and pursue his way, that we are becoming the beloved community.

So then, may we all open ourselves anew to God each day, saying, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening!"

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

² Mark Labberton, *Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 135.