



A sermon preached by David J. Anderson at the Church of Saint John the Evangelist, June 1, 2018.

Series: "God at Work"

Part I: "God Calls"

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"God at Work" is a sermon series following the stories of Samuel and David in the book of 1 Samuel and tracing God's gracious activities in their lives with a view to helping us grow in our ability to see God's gracious activity at work in our own lives.

Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." (1 Samuel 3: 8a - 10)

My own call to ministry began when I was a child. Some time when I was about eight years old, when young boys dream about what they will do when they grow up, I had run through all of the usual options. I had been particularly attracted to becoming a member of the RCMP, but when I found out that they don't actually routinely wear the red serge, somehow, I was less interested.

One Sunday morning at church I got looking at the minister at the front and I thought that he seemed to have a pretty good gig. Everybody seems to respect him, people listen to him, he's the star of the show. The best part was, he only seemed to work about one hour a week. I started to imagine myself as a member of the clergy. And I remember thinking about it for a long time before I said anything to anybody.

Eventually, I decided that I would start by telling my grandmother. My grandmother was a character, but a very devout Christian. I assumed that my grandmother would be supportive of my dream. So one day, I told her. I was surprised by her response. I blurted out what I wanted to do with my life, and she said, "No David, ye canna just decide ta be a minister. He hafta be called."

I didn't understand what she was talking about. What did it mean to "be called." I did understand that she meant that you had to be called by God. But how on earth was that supposed to happen? Does God actually speak to people? Would someone actually hear a voice? I had many, many questions. But I didn't ask my grandmother, that day. That would not happen until much later.

Despite the questions I had the one thing I understood from my grandmother was this idea that one could be called by God, and while I really had no idea what that might look like, I remember as that child praying, and asking God, to let me know.

This morning we are beginning a new sermon series that will take us through the early part of the summer. We are going to be following the stories of two people from the Old Testament Book of First Samuel. The first is Samuel himself, who becomes one of God's great prophets, and the second is David, who becomes king. Our plan is to trace God's gracious activity in the lives of these people as a way of helping us also to trace God's gracious activity in our own lives.

We are sometimes tempted to think that the things we read about in the Bible only happened in biblical times. If miracles happened, they might have happened then, but they don't happen now. If God ever spoke to people, he might have spoken to people then (in biblical times), but God does n't speak to people now.

The fact is, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we are able to notice that God is at work and active in our world today, often in way very similar to those in biblical times. Our hope, in this sermon series, is that we will be equipped to be more attentive to the way in which God is at work.

This morning we are noticing that one of God's gracious activities in our world and in the lives of his people is that God calls. God calls people take on roles in God's activities in the world.

God's call of Samuel didn't happen out of the blue. Samuel lived in a peculiar time and arrived on the scene in a peculiar way. It was a chaotic time for God's people. All the clans operated as their own little fiefdoms and in the Book of Judges we are told, "Everyone does what is right in their own eyes," (Judges 21:25). This wasn't a good thing. The law of God was being ignored. And the reason that we are given for the lawlessness and chaos, is this ... "for there was no king in Israel." There was not only a kind of political chaos, but there was a kind of religious lethargy as well. Religious rituals were steady, but only rarely provoked a divine encounter: "the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."

Samuel is born in these tumultuous times. He was the child his mother longed for in order to be blessed. She had been barren. In the ancient world, a closed womb was cause for grief, and Hannah, his mother had much sorrow, so much that when she prayed for him the priest Eli thought she was drunk (1 Samuel 1:12-14). His birth made her sing, and she sang a prophetic song that should convince us that she was as much prophet as Samuel would become. His birth song was revolutionary (1 Samuel 2:1-10), and though she had asked God for him, she listened to an internal prompting that said he belonged to the nation-state and to God.

The story of Samuel, then, does not start with this voice that we read about today, nor with Eli's training, but rather with the mother who gave birth to him; who nursed him; who prayed for him; who sang over him; and who weaned him so that he would be free to learn how to minister to God. God called from him from the womb (Psalm 139:13-16). Psalm 139 is the appointed Psalm for today. Samuel was known and knew God before he ever entered the birth canal.

So Hannah passes the boy Samuel on to the old prophet Eli, to be mentored. Eli is old, can no longer see, but he still is in service. Eli mentors Samuel into identifying God's voice. Sure, it took three times of Samuel running into Eli's room in the middle of that night before Eli had an "a ha" moment. But as Samuel lay on his bed in the temple at Shiloh, near the ark of God -- the icon that

symbolized God's presence -- he was in a position to hear. Both Hannah and Eli were part of that journey.

And though the word of God had been rare, Eli knew at least how to attend to that voice. "Speak, for your servant is listening." And, sure enough, the voice of God called "as before" (verse 10). God's persistence and Eli's mentoring work hand in hand.

Sometimes it takes someone else — a parent, a friend, a mentor — to help us hear God's calling in our lives. It was certainly that way for Samuel. God was audibly calling out to the boy, and he didn't recognize who was speaking to him until the old priest Eli caught on and told Samuel it was the voice of God. "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening," Eli told Samuel to respond. Something I notice, though, is that Samuel was already listening and responding — to Eli. Samuel was attentive to those around him, eagerly responding to what he thought was Eli's call. Had he not been, both he and Eli would have missed what God was doing in their lives.

This morning I talked about the beginning of my call to priestly ministry. But the fact is that God has called me to many different roles in my life. Son, husband, father, friend, priest. The fact is that God hasn't just called me into roles, God hasn't just called me to wear different hats. But God has also called me to be myself and to grow into my identity as a child of God.

God is calling each of us to something, whether it is our life's vocation, or a new thing God has for us to do, or for a new depth of relationship, becoming more fully who we are in Christ. God's voice can be hard to discern, but there are Elis to each of our Samuels, out there listening with us and helping us to hear. I believe that we can be Elis to one another and I hope that this sermon series will help us to explore that, helping us to see God's gracious activity in our lives, and suggesting how we might respond with openness to what God is seeking to do.

By listening for God in community, we can discern together the ways God is moving in our midst.