

Call and Response

I Samuel 3:1-10, (11-20); John 1:43-51; Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18

Call. It is a word that I dreaded, especially while taking courses working towards ordination. It was expected that I, like the other students, understood our call, that we could explain our call. Honestly, I wasn't even sure what "call" meant. All I knew was that I was interested in theology, and that worship should be more God-focused, less self-focused. I hoped, rather naively, that my courses and relationships with other students would be the place where I could learn these things.

For sure, I have heard "calls": children crying in the night – we had a colicky child; chickens clucking in the morning; robocalls; emergency calls when I was with Centre County Mental Health. However, "call" has also come to have a more spiritual meaning for me though it still makes me squirm. "Being called" is mysterious, dynamic, personal, communal (group). Some people have definitive moments when they feel or hear or sense a call. Others have a gradual awakening. Do some people not hear a call at all?

Samuel hears a call. Samuel is a miracle child, the son of Hannah who feared she would never have a child. She prayed fervently and promised that if she got pregnant she would give her son to God. Eventually, Hannah and Elkanah have a son and when he's weaned, they bring Samuel, and a sacrifice, to the temple. They turn their treasured son over to Eli, the priest, who will train and instruct Samuel in God's ways. Every year Hannah comes to the temple for the yearly sacrifice, bringing a new linen garment for her son Samuel. (Hannah and Elkanah have five more children after Samuel.)

Eli, the priest, has two sons of his own who are older than Samuel. Somehow, growing up in the temple these two learned disrespect – disrespect for their father, the tradition, women, and God. When Eli confronts them about their despicable behavior, they refuse to listen. The text says, "for it was the Lord's will to put them to death" (1Sam 2:25).

Surely Hannah doesn't know she is leaving her miracle child to be mentored by Eli in the midst this ugly and tragic family situation.

Not only is Eli's family a mess, but the text also says that "In those days, the word of the Lord was rare – there were not many visions (prophecy was uncommon)." So, Samuel is raised in the temple, learning the customs and traditions but does not encounter God. He sleeps in the temple, near the Ark of the Covenant, and the word of God is not revealed to him...until that night when Samuel hears a voice calling him. It is such an unusual and unexpected occurrence that he believes it must be the nearly blind Eli calling to him. Because Samuel is running around in the dark, trying to understand what he is hearing, he almost misses the "call."

Fast forward to our Gospel lesson, when Jesus calls his disciples, it is not some mysterious disembodied voice; he is just a man, walking on the road, meeting people. Andrew had been a follower of John the Baptist but, when Jesus walks by, John points to Jesus and says, "There, there goes the Lamb of God." Andrew goes to tell his brother Simon and they both become followers. The next day Jesus meets Andrew and Simon's neighbor, Philip, and Philip goes to call Nathanael.

Though Simon responds to Jesus through his brother Andrew, this kind of third hand call does not impress Nathanael. His response is impatient, and disrespectful: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Or to use the vernacular of President Trump, "Can anything good come out of that s-hole country?" Philip's simple response to Nathanael is the same that Jesus used with Andrew and Simon, "Come and see."

Surprisingly, Nathanael goes along with Philip to see Jesus. Because he's Jesus, he somehow knows how crass Nathanael is about Nazareth as a hometown, and yet Jesus does not reject Nathanael. Nathanael may have been lazily sitting under a fig tree, but

Jesus sees something in him. Jesus walks right up and speaks to Nathanael, who is at once flabbergasted, embarrassed, amazed...and convinced.

When I tell the story this way, with Jesus from an “expletive” country, I am not sure what to make of it. For sure it means that we must remember that Jesus is not from Norway or Germany or the US. If we too follow Jesus, well then, we must stand with Jesus and all the others who come from denigrated countries.

Jesus knows Nathanael is a disrespectful, foul-mouthed mess. And forgive me, but I find myself hoping that Jesus will build a wall, please Jesus, build a wall, to keep that one out. Jesus, please be clear: there are some people who are in and some people, for whom there are not enough adjectives of awful, who will/must be kept out.

But that is not how John tells the story. Jesus invites Nathanael to be a follower, to be part of the group, even though he has doubts and is irreverent. And Nathanael says yes to the call, proclaiming that Jesus is the Son of God, the leader of Israel. The gospel writer reinforces Nathanael’s affirmative response to Jesus’ call by using “code” to tell us that Nathanael is definitely in. The fig tree represents Israel, and the angels going up and down the ladder that Jesus says Nathanael will see. These remind us of Jacob’s dream of angels and a ladder. Nathanael and Jacob, both have their issues but they are still God’s people. In my self-righteousness, it is good for me to remember that God calls all kinds of people. And all kinds of people respond. And some...do not. It’s complicated.

These stories of Samuel and Nathanael hearing God’s call follow quickly on the Christmas season when we tell a story that celebrates God – where we encounter God - coming among us as a baby human, helpless and needing constant care. These stories and other biblical stories show us that there are other ways we can encounter God. Macrina Wiederkehr, Benedictine sister and author, says it this way:

Holiness comes wrapped in the ordinary.

There are burning bushes all around you.

Every tree is full of angels.

Hidden beauty is waiting in every crumb.

If a “personal call” is complicated,...it is even trickier to try and hear the call of God as a group, to a group. This might be where “spiritual but not religious” comes from. I am not always sure what is meant when someone says, ‘I am spiritual but not religious.’ Maybe they mean: “I want to have a personal spiritual experience, I do have personal spiritual experiences but I don’t trust religious institutions – religious communities. They are too cumbersome, and hypocritical and duplicitous and prescriptive and...” I like the spiritual...not so sure about the religious.

As Brethren, as Anabaptists, we consider community an important part of how we hear God, it is essential for us – as is our Pietists roots. It’s a balancing act but we try to hold our spiritual (Pietistic) and religious (Anabaptist / community) experiences together. We value the personal and communal. And it is complicated.

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr day - it is important for us to remember that God’s call comes to us not only as a voice in the night – like with Samuel, and with God coming among us in Jesus, and the small beauty in the many crumbs all around us. God’s voice also comes to us in the voices of people who suffer and live with injustice.

- God is heard in the voices of women who have been harassed and assaulted.
- God is heard in the voices of children who have been ignored and abused.
- God is heard in the voices of parents who have lost children to senseless violence.
- God is heard in the voices of families who fear being torn apart by the games and gains of politicians.

- God is heard in the voices of those who have lost livelihoods and homes in hurricanes, fires, mudslides and pandemics.
- God is heard in the voices of people and creatures and the earth that live with seemingly endless war, in Syria, Israel/Palestine, Nigeria, Congo, Ukraine.

So many voices clamor for our attention. Here in the heart of the empire, it is important to slow down and listen carefully for the still, small voice. It takes practice, to listen beyond and through the noise. It takes practice to ground yourself and tune in with yourself, to align yourself with God. Let's take a few minutes in silence to listen, to breathe deeply. Practice opening yourself to hear God's call. I wonder what the response will be...Amen.

Clay Z. Moyer

January 17, 2021 Hatfield Church of the Brethren