

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, January 28, 2024
"Balancing Acts of Faith"

Young at Heart Message

You know what? It has been a long week.

Getting back from vacation is almost harder than going on vacation!

I think I might actually lie down and take a quick cat nap. Hope you're all OK with that...

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[Man's voice, softly]: Jamie...

... Wha...? What was that? Did someone call me? I'm here – what is it?

No one called me? Strange... Oh well, back to napping...

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[Man's voice, a little louder]: Jamie!

... Who said that? I'm right here – what is it?

No one called me again? I must be dreaming...

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...

...

[Man's voice, louder still]: JAMIE!

OK, if none of you are calling me, then there's only one other thing it could be...

God must be scolding me for sleeping on the job!

I guess I'd better get up and do what God is calling to me do!

The Message

All right, I know that was another silly way to demonstrate the scripture reading today.

But, I love this passage. I was really excited to preach on this passage on the 14th, but then we canceled church due to the frigidly cold temperatures, and I missed my chance to do this silly recreation.

So, I figured why not do it today instead?

It's not very often that I preach from the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament.

I usually try to stick to Jesus's examples because there is so much to learn from Jesus and his followers.

But, there are lessons to learn from these older scriptures too, and today's passage is a good one.

The passage starts out by telling us that we are hearing the story of Samuel, an aid to the priest Eli, who is most likely older, and who we know is going blind.

The scripture then tells us something interesting.

It says, "in those days, the Lord hardly ever spoke directly to people, and he did not appear to them in dreams very often."

This is a curious statement, because many of the stories in the Hebrew Bible do involve direct communication with God in some way or another.

There are a lot of signs and conversations directly with God that we don't see much at all once Jesus appears in the New Testament.

So, this line places us in context so that we can understand why Samuel is confused when he hears someone calling him, and Eli says it wasn't him.

Samuel probably starts to think he's going a little crazy – either that, or Eli is losing *his* mind!

What's particularly interesting here is that Eli doesn't recognize what's happening sooner.

Eli is a man of God, and we understand that he had been doing that work for quite some time. So it's interesting that he did not recognize sooner what Samuel was experiencing.

Eli eventually does figure it out, and tells Samuel to speak directly to the Lord next time he hears his name called.

Finally, the last line we heard today was Samuel saying to God "I'm listening. What do you want me to do?"

I chose to end the passage here because I want to talk about the ways we are called – ways that may or may not be as obvious as God speaking directly to Samuel.

I'll start by sharing my own example.

As most of you who were here on my first Sunday at Good Shepherd know, I left the church for many years before returning.

And my return to church wasn't compelled by a voice from God telling me to go back to church.

I was invited back to church by my ex-husband. And I will admit that I was hesitant to go back to church at all, but sometimes we do things for other people even if it's not something we would normally do on our own.

But that invitation created a tiny snowball that eventually started to roll and gather more and more snow until it turned into a snow boulder that I could no longer ignore.

God very well might have been calling my name, but that call did indeed come through someone else and not as a voice from God directly.

Going back to church sparked curiosity for me again about Christianity, and I realized how little I knew, and I started to want to learn more.

So, I started exploring seminaries with no intention of becoming a pastor. My only goal was to learn, and I figured I might as well get a Master's degree while I did.

Was God gently calling my name already then, and I was following that call under the guise of my own curiosity? I suspect so.

After about two years of seminary, I started to think welllll, maaaaybe I could go into church leadership.

I started seeking out denominations and quite literally stumbled across the Moravian Church, after trying to connect with two other denominations who simply never called me back.

Once I got connected to the Moravian Church, the snowball was rolling so fast and collecting so much snow that I definitely couldn't ignore it any longer.

It may have been then that God was practically yelling my name and I was finally ready to say, "I'm listening. What do you want me to do?"

But it took me a long time to realize those nudges were a call from God.

I must not have been totally asleep, because I kept putting one foot in front of the other.

But it took a long time and a lot of nudging to get me to stop dragging my feet, open my eyes, and to say "OK God, I'm listening. What's next? Where do you want me to go?"

And, hearing the call and acting on it were two very different things.

For me, being willing to say "God, I'm listening" was hard, not for lack of desire to listen, but because the logistics of doing that were challenging.

It wasn't as easy as just dropping everything one day and picking up God's call the next.

It was a lengthy, arduous process that took daily work, tons of conversations, significant help from my network and community, and organization of many moving parts.

This passage from 1 Samuel makes it sound easy to just hear what God is telling us, and obediently follow.

But I think we all know that life is not always set up to act on a call from God without sacrifices, challenges, delays, frustrations, and a lot of uncertainty.

And yet, sometimes God is persistent. Sometimes we want to lie down and nap, and God whispers (or yells) into our ears.

Sometimes we start to move forward on something we're called to do, and something stops us.

We get tired, or we think we don't have the means or the resources, or we think what God is asking of us is beyond our reach.

But God calls again, a little firmer this time. And still, we might struggle. Or we might move ourselves forward a bit, but then feel like we might need to lie down and rest again.

And when God continues to nudge, to push, to call our names in the night, it is not always an easy ask.

It takes work. It can mean starting and stopping, trying and failing, making mistakes, taking wrong turns, and tremendous uncertainty.

And through all of it, God continues to guide us so we can fulfill our call.

This story of Samuel and Eli gives us pause to think about those times in our lives when we've been called for something.

We are reminded of the people along our way who said, in one way or another, "it's God calling – open your heart and listen."

And it gives us pause to look at our lives as they are right now, and to ask if God is calling us for anything right at this moment.

What push do we need to start putting that call into action?

What courage do we need to say "Here I am Lord. I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord, if you lead me"?

Samuel demonstrated that courage for us today.

As you leave this sacred space, hold these questions in the back of your mind:

- When God calls you, how do you know? Who or what does God use to speak to you?

- Is there anything God has been calling you to do, or say? Is there anyone God has been calling you to forgive, or to learn more about, or to better understand?

God invites you to do like Samuel did and set aside your uncertainty or fear of the unknown so that you can do what you're called to do.

The Good News from Samuel's story is that God will guide you on the path you've been called to walk.

Not only will God guide you, but God will walk that path – into the weeds or the thorns or the quicksand or whatever else stands in your way – and God will be there with you as you forge ahead to answer the call. Amen.

Let us pray:

God of love, grace, and mercy, we come before you today first and foremost with gratitude. We are grateful that you do not give up the first time you call us to serve you, but that you persist in calling us and guiding us in the direction you wish for us to go. We know we do not always listen or understand your call at first, but we are grateful you continue to pursue us, support us, and open doors for us along the way. With gratitude, we pray in your name, Amen.