



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
22 October 2017
Sermon: "Listen Up"
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block

1 Thessalonians 1:4-9
1 Samuel 3:1-10, (11-20)

Two weeks ago, renowned New York Times columnist, David Brooks came to speak at UNCA. During his talk, he told a story.

A young man in a suit goes in for a job interview at a big established company. The person from HR doing the interviewing, is calm, cool and professional.

She asks him a list of typical questions:

"Have you ever been part of team?"

"How do you manage stress?"

"Are you familiar with the office program that we use?"

The young man sitting up tall answers each question to perfection. Once they have nearly exhausted the list, the interviewer asks, "Do you have any questions for me?" He thinks about it for a moment, and with a gentle smile, leans forward and says,

"What would you do if you weren't afraid?"

The interviewer's whole body suddenly tenses up, and then softens, and then unexpected tears begin to roll down her cheeks. Although she can't muster the courage to say it out loud, she knows this: if she was truly unafraid, she wouldn't be sitting in the seat she is in today. She would be doing something different – something that really calls to her.

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The notion of "call" is a funny thing.

As children, we are constantly asked what we feel called to do,

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"What are your passions?"

"Where would you like to go exploring?"

"How will you change the world?"

But as we get older something shifts. Our imaginations "grow up" and suddenly our focus is no longer on what calls to us, but rather on finding the best job security, a good retirement plan, a sport that guarantees the least possible injuries, a school for the kids with a solid reputation, a community of likeminded adults.

Our feet shift somehow further away from callings that excite us or even terrify us, and move towards realities that make us feel more safe and steady.

Fredrick Buechner writes that your “call” should be where your deepest gladness and the world’s deepest hunger meet.ⁱ That’s the place God calls us into.

But no matter how faithful we consider ourselves to be, as our responsibilities mount and fear clouds our vision, it can become harder for us to keep ourselves completely open to God: to listen intently for the ways we are uniquely being “called,” to dare respond with the words, “Here I am.”

“What would you do if you weren’t afraid?”

When it comes to God “calling” people, the Almighty has a tendency to reach out to those who seem wholly unqualified on paper. *Think about it:* Moses with a stutter being called to speak for God. Mary single and betrothed being called to bear God’s only son. And today, we have Samuel being called as a young boy to serve as a prophet to all of Israel.

We meet Samuel in a time when God’s voice seemed especially faint. The text tells us *‘the word of the Lord was rare in those days and visions of God were not widespread.’* For this reason perhaps, Samuel, who is this rambunctious eleven-year-old knows little about the Lord. He spends his time as an apprentice to Eli, caring for a shrine in the city of Shiloh.

Eli is more than six times his age, his eyes have withered with time and his heart has been broken by his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas. Yet, somehow Eli’s faith in God has not waivered.

Samuel and Eli are living in an age where corruption abounds and Eli’s sons are at the center of the controversy. As priests, their hunger for power has replaced their hunger for the Lord. Instead of doing the sacred work for which they’ve been called, they have become obsessed with satisfying their own desires: consuming precious fats from holy sacrifices, sexually assaulting women on their way to pray.

In a week where we have been harshly reminded that those in power too often take advantage of the vulnerable; Samuel’s precarious reality feels all too familiar to us. Today’s world can be a bewildering place and sometimes God’s voice can seem all too silent.

But our text reminds us that *‘the lamp of God does not go out.’* There is always a glimmer of divine light flickering in the air. God is constantly moving, reaching, tugging, clearing His throat, ready to cry out our name at any moment, ready to call us out of our comfort zones and towards our true “callings” - whether we are ready to hear it or not. And when we do, sometimes it takes a friend, or even a community, to give us the wisdom and the courage to respond.

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“Samuel!” God calls, awakening the sleeping boy by name. “Samuel!”
“Here I am!” he says running to Eli - sure that it is his mentor’s voice.
“I did not call you,” Eli says, “Go lie down.” So, Samuel returns to sleep, only to be awakened again moments later – and again and again.

It’s such a comical scene! You could imagine a young Jerry Lewis or Jim Carrey in the role of Samuel! Here we have God, putting all of Her faith in this young boy who isn’t even able to recognize the One who is speaking.

But we know that God doesn’t choose people by accident.
There is something remarkable about Samuel in this moment.
No matter how many times the voice beckons, this young boy responds. He rises up and runs towards the One he believes needs him most.
It is as if he already knows the tenor of faith before he knows the voice of God.

How many of us would have just pulled the covers over our ears,
or whined in frustration, or begged someone else to go in our place?
Not Samuel. As God watches him faithfully running about,
God is reminded why he’s been chosen.

And Eli is watching too. His mentor finally realizes what’s really going on here. He helps Samuel name the voice that has been calling and he encourages him to answer it: *“Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”* Yes, this is Samuel’s call story, but Eli is essential to it.

I remember approaching my pastor several years ago to say,
“I think I want to go into the ministry.”
“You have a call,” he said.” I quickly checked my phone. “No, no,” he laughed, “not that kind of a call - you’ll learn what that word means later.”

No doubt we have all had people throughout the course of our lives who have helped us...
expanded our imaginations,
encouraged us to be fearless and open,
affirmed us in our particular and collective callings.
Maybe it was an art teacher showing you how to hold a paint brush correctly in your hand,
a coach suddenly counting on you to make that final play,
a child wishing you good luck as we head out to look for work,
a parent slipping that college application underneath your door,
a stranger taking the time to stop and talk.

It’s true to our theology. We believe that each of us is claimed and called by God, but it takes a community to affirm that voice inside.
That’s why church is so important,
why we baptize one another before our faith family,
why we vote in new deacons, elders, pastors and members,
why we pray for one another and lay on hands when we take bold new steps.

Samuel was never meant to be called alone – none of us are.
We are called as different parts of one body and we need each other.

“What would you do if you weren’t afraid?”

It would be so tempting today for us to stop at verse ten (right when Samuel finally learns that it’s been God calling all along). It would be the perfect ending to a Hollywood comedy. But when we keep on reading, we find that what God wants to share with Samuel is far from funny.

Unlike others called by God, Samuel isn’t sent out on a mission to part seas or follow north stars, no, God simply tells Samuel that Eli’s family and all of Eli’s descendants will be punished for the wickedness of his two sons. As God’s new prophet, Samuel is left bearing the weight of this devastating news. And worse, Eli wants to know exactly what God said. So, Samuel bravely shares the truth with his mentor.

Samuel’s story reminds us that being called by God does not promise the easier road. Far from it. God calls us to speak hard truth to a broken and bitter world. To be prophetic means to be boldly honest, fearlessly real - for God’s sake:

...like the millions of people around the world this week who declared #metoo online in order to demonstrate how pervasive sexual harassment and assault are in our society.

...like the NFL football players taking a knee to protest ongoing racism and police brutality.

...like our youth here at GCPC advocating for better ways to care for God’s precious earth and ensure that families across Asheville have access to healthy food.

To be called by God is to be humble and hopeful enough to speak truth out of love without knowing fully how it will be received. To be called by God is to be faithful and foolish enough to follow the path that isn’t safe or secure, but only promises a glimmer of Christ’s hope for the future.

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Dr. Walter Ziffer was nine years old when the Nazis marched into his hometown in Czechoslovakia. At the time, no one could fathom what abject cruelty lied ahead. For the next nine years, he and his family were sent to ghettos and separated into different concentration camps all across eastern Europe.

Walter’s childhood was a stolen one. He was surviving hour to hour, witnessing horrendous crimes against humanity, being called by a number instead of his name. All the while, countless civilians - many whom were Christians - were watching from afar. To survive, he says he became like a zombie, unable to feel anything.

After the war, he went to find his mother to see if she was still alive. She looked like a skeleton too. When he approached her, she walked right passed him - not able to recognize the boy she once held in her lap.

Last week at AB Tech, Walter shared his heart-wrenching story to a crowded room. As he spoke, at times his voice cracked, "It's hard to re-live all this," he said. "If it weren't for my wife, Gale encouraging me, I couldn't be here tonight. I want to talk to you all because I want my story to impact your education, so that you can make sure nothing like this happens again. You can work to welcome in refugees like me looking for freedom, for the chance to live like human beings, and you can question any rhetoric that tries to divide us. To put it simply, I hope that you choose to be a good person. This doesn't come automatically, so please, be good."

Walter spoke fearless truth to our Asheville community that night, and we listened, and I hope that we were changed 'for good.'

When Samuel speaks truth to Eli. Eli does exactly what he taught Samuel to do - he listens to the child. He doesn't dismiss his words (however shocking they are). He doesn't curse the Lord or send the boy away. He trusts the message and the messenger. It is what his faith calls him to do.

"What would we do if we weren't afraid?"

Samuel's story is our story - we are constantly being awakened by God, who calls us by name, and invites us to step away from what is comfortable, so that we can move towards the places most in need of truth telling and holy healing.

Eli's story is our story - for our faith teaches that we cannot be Christians alone. We need one another to recognize God's voice and to embolden us to listen up and fearlessly follow.

Now what?

Here in our community of faith, we are in stewardship season - this time of trusting and imagining together. Already we are taking some good steps, discerning some essential questions, but I wonder how far our courage can stretch.

When God calls out our name, how will we choose to respond?
Maybe we'll run to and fro,
maybe we'll look to one another,
or maybe we'll simply have the faith
to believe that we have everything we need right now
to hold out our hands and sing out "Here I Am."

ⁱ Fredrick Buechner. *Beyond Words*. San Francisco, HarperOne, 2004. p.405