

“When God Calls Your Name”

You may have heard the story of the man who spent his first day in jail. That evening, all of the inmates gathered about in the courtyard. One man would call out a number, and then the rest would laugh heartily. Another number would then be called, with even more laughter. So it went for the evening. When the man returned to his cell, he turned to his cell-mate and asked, “What was going on out there?”

“Oh,” his cell-mate responded, “that’s the way we tell jokes around here. You see, we know all the jokes, and we’ve heard them hundreds of times. So rather than waste time retelling them, we’ve numbered them. When someone calls out a number, we all know the joke, and so we laugh!”

The next evening, the same thing happened. After a few numbers were called and the rest responded with laughter, the newcomer thought he would try *his* hand at this kind of joke-telling. In a quiet moment, he called out a number. Not one person laughed. The new inmate was puzzled, but kept quiet until he returned to his cell and his cell-mate. “What happened?” he asked. “Why didn’t anyone laugh?”

“Well,” his cell-mate replied, “You know how it is . . . some people can tell ‘em, and some can’t.”

When I come to the story of Samuel’s call in 1 Samuel 3, I feel as though I could almost call out a number: One, for Noah and the ark. Two, for David and Goliath. Three, for Daniel in the lion’s den. Four, for Jonah and the great fish. Five, for the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. Six, for Joshua and the battle of Jericho. Seven, for the call of Samuel. We may all think we know the story of the call of Samuel quite well. We’ve heard, or told, it many times. All I may need to do is call out a number, and my work for this text will be done. But when we read Scripture, we are to listen for when God calls *our* name. We want to know how the Bible speaks to *us*, how the message intersects with us personally.

Do you remember the story of Samuel? His mother, Hannah, could not have children. She prayed that if God would give her a son then she would give that child back to God. That son was Samuel, whose name means, “asked of God.” When we pick up the story, Samuel had already been given back to God; he was living in the tabernacle with Eli the priest. Jewish tradition says that Samuel was only twelve years old when he heard God’s call to him in the middle of the night.

The details provided for us in verses two, three and seven help us understand the setting in which the events of chapter three take place. Samuel was lying down in his appointed place inside the tabernacle, not that far from the Ark of the Covenant, which contained stone tablets on which was chiseled the Ten Commandments. The Ark of the Covenant was inside the Holy of Holies. Eli was sleeping somewhere else, not too distant for Samuel to hear when he called. As the author informs us, Eli’s eyesight had greatly deteriorated, so that his vision was seriously impaired. With Eli’s age, weight, and visual limitations, he needed the help of a boy like Samuel. Samuel could bring Eli a drink of water in the middle of the night or run other errands for him. It was only natural for Samuel to assume that a call late at night came from his master, Eli.

From the writer’s statement in verse three, we know that the call of Samuel came in the early hours of the morning, for he says that “the lamp of God had not yet gone out.” The lamp was the golden lampstand, with its seven lamps which were to burn at night. Samuel’s resting place in the tabernacle suggests something other than an ordinary bed chamber. More probably we are to understand that the lad was serving in a priestly role, perhaps caring for the lamps which were kept burning all night before the holy place; perhaps young Samuel was responsible for other routine duties around the Tabernacle.

Then the Lord called Samuel. And once Samuel heard his name, he responded, “Here I am. Here I am; you called me.”

Eli said, “I did not call you; go back and lie down.” Samuel did as he was told. He settled under the covers and again his name pierced the night, “Samuel.” Again, Samuel got up, went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me,” the same exact words he had uttered when he heard his name the first time.

This time, Eli said “My son, I did not call you; go back and lie down.” Depending on the vocal inflection, adding “my son” could’ve been words of comfort or could have a different conation. . . When I was young, if my mom said, “Charles Roy!” I knew I better act quickly.

The author indicated that Samuel did not yet know the Lord. The key word is “yet.” It was a matter of time then as it is today. If parents are active in church, live their lives as Christians, exhibiting godly behavior before their children, chances are very likely that the child will know the Lord.

A third time, Samuel heard his name. Again, he made the identical response to Eli, “Here I am; you called me.” Samuel was not expecting to get a word from God. People of his day did not have their name called.

After the third time, the wise priest decided there was a pattern. The first time, the boy may have been hearing things. The second time, the boy may have been seeking attention. But the third time indicated something else. Like Eli, today’s preacher-types don’t always get it right. But when Eli recognized God’s presence, he instructed Samuel as to the proper response to God’s call. Samuel was to indicate a willingness to listen.

Eli said, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you say ‘Speak for your servant is listening.’” This would solve the mystery. If God was speaking directly to the boy, then Samuel could respond directly. Today, I am grateful that when God speaks to us, when God calls our name, that we don’t have to go to anybody to reach God. We can access God directly.

There was a time when telephone operators had to connect people. On the old Andy Griffith shows, Sheriff Taylor would pick up the phone and say, “Clara, give me Gomer on the line.” Clara was the operator. She was required to make the connection. You and I do not need anyone for us to make a connection to God. When God calls on us individually, we are to respond individually.

The first two times Samuel was called by God, the young lad assumed he was hearing the voice of Eli, his master, It makes sense, especially if Eli sometimes called to Samuel for assistance during the night. It was not until the third “call” that Eli finally grasped the situation and realized that *God* was calling Samuel. At his instructions, Samuel responded when God once again called. Samuel did not do anything exceptional to prompt God’s appearance; he was simply going about his daily duties. There was nothing particularly romantic or “spiritual” about dusting and cleaning tabernacle furnishings, about sweeping the floors, or about serving a nearly blind, nearly dead old man (Eli). But in the course of going about his assigned tasks, God found Samuel and spoke to him. Many people want to do something spectacular to obtain God’s blessings and power. Samuel teaches us that this is not the norm. *Let us go about our lives, faithfully doing the work God has given us to do, leaving the spectacular interventions, the great successes, to God.* When God wants something to happen, God will act, not so much because of

what we have done, but because God's promises are always kept.

Samuel went back to bed and waited for the unexpected to happen again. I wonder how long the boy waited. He knew he could expect to hear the voice again. It was not a dream. No one was playing a trick on him. It was a matter of time until the voice called him again.

I like the wording of verse ten, "The Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel, Samuel." God stood beside Samuel and called on him again, just as had been done *before*. We can trust God, because of God's *pattern*. As at the other times: God will walk beside us when the unexpected happens, because God has done so *before*. God will provide our needs, just as *before*. God will be true to us, because God has done so *before*.

What a tremendous image verse ten provides: God standing beside young Samuel, calling as at the other times. We can depend upon that kind of God. God called his name just as God had done three times earlier. Yet this time, Samuel responded, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

When God calls *our* name, that should be *our* response. We should be waiting for God to speak to *us*, with the same anticipation we implement when we are expecting *bad* news. We should attune our ears to the voice of God, because we have heard it before. And when we hear God call *our* name, we are to be receptive to what God is saying.

But just how often does God *call* our name? Personally, I have never heard God's voice audibly, but I do believe that God speaks to us in four ways: through prayer, Scripture, other people, and circumstances. When God calls *our* name, what will *we* do when we feel God's leading, yearning? What will we do when faced with a decision, and the Bible speaks directly to that issue? When other people serve as God's messengers, it can almost be like God is calling our name. When hearing a sermon that spoke directly to me, I have thought, "That sermon had *my name* all over it." And God can use circumstances to also call our name.

Many people do have problems with the phrase "God told me to do..." or "God said I should..." And, to be fair about it, I have to admit that there is some justification for concern or skepticism. Far too many folks make false claims about hearing the voice of God. As I heard a guy tell a gal when I was in college, "God has told me that you and I should be together," to which she responded, "God hasn't told me that!" All kinds of people are making all kinds of claims about hearing the voice of God these days.

When does God call *your* name? What did you expect when you got ready to come to church today? To see some good friends and catch up on what's been happening with them since last Sunday? To sing some old favorite hymns (or not)? To hear a wonderful, spirit-filled, biblical, short sermon (or not)? Or did something deep inside you ask, "I wonder what God will have to say to me today?"

When you open the pages of your Bible to read, what do you expect to encounter? A lesson in morality? An inspirational story? Authoritative support for some pattern of behavior about which you have already made up your mind (that's called "proof-texting," by the way)? Or do you open the pages of your Bible expecting to hear the voice of God *speaking* to you, *instructing* you, *inspiring* you, *molding* your heart and mind in the image of God? Would you know God's voice if you heard it? In this story from the Old Testament, when the young Samuel heard his name being called, he didn't know it was God. He thought it was Eli calling him. The

scene is really funny if you think about it. God keeps waking Samuel up, and Eli keeps telling him to go back to sleep. The storyteller says, "Samuel did not yet know the Lord." Well, duh! Which leads me back to my question about whether or not *we* would recognize God's voice if *we* heard it. We hear our name being called by a whole chorus of voices – some of us more than others – asking us to do this, buy that, drink this soft drink, eat this cereal, use this Internet provider or that one. So it's only natural, isn't it, that if God should call us, we might be confused and might not be able to recognize whose voice we hear? Like Samuel, when the voice of God calls our name, we tend to become confused and more than a little bit afraid.

When God called Samuel, his response was, "Here I am." At the beginning of a new year, all of us are to say, "Here I am." How is God calling *your* name? Have you been hearing that voice in the back of your mind and thought it was someone else? Has God been preparing you for a new ministry, a mission project, a challenging relationship and if so, now is the time for you to say, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Even though in times like these it may appear that the word of the Lord is rare, God is not silent. God is constantly speaking, constantly creating, constantly calling. And one night, when you're minding your own business, watching television or reading a book or surfing the Internet on the computer; or one Sunday when you're in church, just going through the motions, there is a voice. You hear your name, you recognize the voice, and your world will never be the same. When God calls your name may your response be, "Speak, for your servant is listening."