

***“I Heard You Calling in the Night” I Samuel 3: 1-20; I Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18 1-22-06***

God is calling us. Each and every one of us. Over and over again. Can you hear God? Can you hear God now? Or will you hear God later? God does not give up on us.

Sometimes when God calls us, we think we are being called by someone or something else. Sometimes it is *someone* else and we trek off in that direction seeking love or acceptance or a sense of value. Sometimes it is *something* else like ambition or self-service or some other, worldly thing. But, there are times it is the persistent call of God.

Think of Samuel. He thought Eli was calling him in the night. It took a while for him to discern the voice of God.

If we remember Samuel’s story at all, we will recall that his mother, Hannah, prayed to be able to have a child. Her husband’s other wife had children but Hannah had not. The wife with the children would pick on Hannah because she was barren. This caused great distress to her. So she prayed and prayed to God to give her a son. She even bargained with God and promised that she would dedicate her son’s life to God’s service if she could only have a child. Those of us who conceived with ease cannot understand her desperation. A child would make Hannah whole. I am grateful this kind of thought has been set aside by most of us in our day and age. But for Hannah it was a part of her worth in life to be able to produce a son.

Her prayers were answered when Samuel was born and the “Song of Hannah,” a song of thanksgiving, found earlier in I Samuel is a model for Mary’s song in the New Testament. Hannah’s promise to God was fulfilled when she took her son to the temple and handed him over to Eli.

So, we see Samuel being called by God and finally understanding that call in the night.

The anthem that we joined in singing a few minutes ago, “Here I am Lord,” sings of Samuel and many others who heard the call of God when it says: “Here I am Lord, is it I Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord, if you lead me, I will hold your people in my heart.” This is a song that is near and dear to pastors, as it should be to all of us.

Every pastor has a story of his or her call to the pastorate. Sometimes in pastoral bull sessions we exchange these stories that are as diverse as the people who tell them. Some are very dramatic calls. A bolt of lightning from the blue. I know someone who was called while watching television. More are gradual calls, a slow realization that God wants you!! The finger is really pointing in your direction as much as you hopes it is not. Very often it takes a long time and a lot of persistence on God’s part to convince a person that they are the one being called.

I was certain God had the wrong address when I started to discern a persistent voice calling, calling me. I knew God’s aim was off-----God wanted the dear, sweet, kind, man next door. God did not want the mother of three daughters who often stood up to and sometimes against the ruling body of her own church. God could not want the mid thirty-ish woman who had no problem pointing to what it was her beloved home church leaders managed to do *so* wrong and without listening to the voice of the members of the congregation they claimed they served.

God could not want a person who questioned so much of authority and theology and who continually searched and searched the pages of scripture, and the pages of those who had gone on before, in an endless quest for the definitive truth that had to be there. This search has never ended, as those of you who know and understand me best must agree.

I was convinced I was at least a little crazy throughout this difficult process that lasted two years for me before I even revealed what was going on to anyone. Those several men from my church who were in seminary looked at me and laughed when I told them that God seemed to be intent on pushing me over the edge. I will always be grateful to the Reverends, some whom are also Reverend Doctors, Dan Schowalter, Jay Karow, and Bob Summers when they told me I was not really crazy, this was just God’s way of calling me into the ministry. They seemed happy

about this, and found it very amusing that the so-called “church heretic and rebel” was being pulled in this direction against her will.

“Yes,” they reminded me, “women are ministers. The Congregationalists were the first to ordain women, remember Antoinette Brown?”

“Of course, I remember her,” I assured them, “but I had never seen her or any other female clergy.” And I hadn’t.

“Well,” they told me, “that probably is because there isn’t one in close proximity. But they do exist.”

And they did. And I finally saw them when I gave in and went to seminary--not sure I would make it though three years of commuting 220 miles three times each week and managing to still be a wife and mother.

“Here I am Lord, Is it *really* I Lord? I heard you calling in the night, in the afternoon and even in the morning.”

My home church, as liberal theologically as it was, while being very conservative politically, could not bear having a woman go to seminary. That’s not quite true, the *congregation* of that church loved the fact that I was the first woman from the church doing this, the governing body of the church could not bear it.

I was warned that this pathway would mean I would lose my old way of life for the new one I was being called into so powerfully . And I did. That was painful, my old way of life was a very, very good one in every earthly sense. But somehow, my faith sustained me and I learned as I moved forward that answering this call was one of the best things I have ever done with my life as difficult as it has been at times.

I must admit I was also told that I would encounter lay people in any and every church I would be called to serve that were just as much of a challenge as I was. I was reminded that “They crucify their leaders, you know.” And I can assure you that I have found these dear, wonderful people, who are just like me, who love to nail me to the wall, or possibly even a cross, and ask me all the hard questions they can and toss into my way any stumbling block they can find. And, while it can be tremendously painful when it happens, the nails are as sharp as they have always been, I find myself still caring deeply for them and loving those who hold the same hammers in their hands that I once held. My children often wonder what is wrong with their mother as they grumble about me “liking everyone.” I just laugh in response. I am not certain if I am somewhat empty headed or just in love with God.

But thanks to many people who have not lost their call to ministry, although there are those times when they have come close to it, I have been sustained on this journey I have chosen and been chosen to take. It is a journey of peace and struggle, of searching and finding, of succeeding and failing, of trying to rise above being just a human and often falling short. It is a sojourn of reaching out and reaching in, of lifting up and letting down. It is a journey of loneliness and a journey filled with people. It is the journey we all take together.

Samuel found his strength through the God who created him, as we all must at one time or another in our lives when we sense that God has a special mission in mind for us. When we sense the finger of God pointing at us we need to stop and think and ponder:

“Here I am Lord, is it I Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord if you lead me, I will hold your people in my heart.” Amen