

Here I am Lord, Don't Call Me!
A Sermon by Missy Shiverick
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: 1Samuel 3:1-10

Last week my daughter Nonie who is a senior at Laurel School gave her senior speech. It is a tradition in several of the small schools and is an awesome experience in that the student gets to speak in front of all her peers and teachers and express a view. It might be the only time in the student's life that they are given this opportunity. Well, Nonie has told me for the past year that the topic of her speech was me and what it has been like to grow up as a "PK", a preacher's kid, and depending upon where we stood with each other, this was very flattering or at times a bit threatening. Was I going to be portrayed as dear mommy or mommy dearest? As the weeks before the speech got closer and she began to think through her speech, it became apparent that the theme was going to be how growing up in a church as a "PK" made her into the loving person with the strong social justice views that she has. I was very proud of her; I was also very humbled by her portrayal of me as a person who raised her with the Biblical values of love and justice for all of God's creation. I think that the expectation she has for me is hard to live up to. I am not the great social radical, the prophetic voice that she portrayed me as being. I am just me...

And I think the humble things like this every year on this Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, and every time I hear the stories in the Bible about prophets who hear God's call to action, and are called to bring forth unpopular messages, and they respond that they will. I question whether I have what it takes to be like them? Are my faith and my convictions strong enough that I could risk being prophetic? What if the congregation doesn't want to listen to another sermon supporting total inclusivity of Gays in our church, a woman's right to all reproductive options, supporting a fair minimum wage or other social gospel messages? Is my faith strong enough to risk preaching social reform and justice for all as a mandate of the Bible? And if not, how can I stand in front of this congregation on MLK Jr. Sunday and preach? So then I pray, "Here I am, but, Oh God, PLEASE DON'T CALL ME!!!!" And then the preaching schedule comes out... and I am assigned this Sunday! God does have a great sense of humor!

Listen now for the word of the Lord as it is written in 1Samuel 3:1-10

This morning's scripture text is God's call to Samuel. The story is probably placed in the Bible to give authority and legitimacy to Samuel as the only source of God's word in the upcoming period. It takes place in the Bible at a low time in the history of Israel. There was religious corruption, political danger, and social upheaval. Sound familiar??? The priest and prophet Eli is old and God has not chosen his sons to be the next prophets for Israel because of their personal corruption.

It was a time when God's word to the Jews was rare and visions from God had become uncommon. It was a time when there was a huge threat from the Philistines to the people of Israel.

So meet Samuel! Samuel is a young boy serving under the old priest Eli. He sleeps near the Ark of the Covenant, which has been a source for the Jews of God's divine presence and illumination. As the story goes, he is asleep and experiences the word of the Lord but does not know it. It is not in his experience as he has nothing on which to recognize the Lord. So, he assumes, it must be Eli calling out to him in the night. So three times God calls out to Samuel, and Samuel runs to Eli and asks 'what is it that you want'. Finally on the third time, Eli perceives that the Lord is calling Samuel. The old Priest gives the young Samuel advice on how to respond to the Lord's call. And Samuel again goes back to bed, and God again calls to him and Samuel responds, "Speak, for your servant is listening!"

God speaks and Samuel finally listens. Although the commentaries on this passage use the call to prophetic work and Samuel's eager response to God's call as a central message here, and the message we disciples of God should try and emulate in our lives, I want to say that there is another equally important message that must come before that response. That is that God speaks and Samuel finally listened. What if God was speaking to Samuel all the time and the story is that Samuel finally listened? What if God is speaking to us is calling us with a message, and we must finally listen as well.

In his editorial in Christian Century Magazine that came out the week after Christmas, John Buchanan told a story about God speaking to a woman. Barbara Wheeler is the president of Auburn Theological Seminary, one of our Presbyterian Seminaries. She was flying across the country to give a speech and used some of her precious upgrade coupons to be able to fly first class in order that she could write her speech while traveling. In first class, she would have room for her lap top, papers, and briefcase. Just before the door to the airplane closed and the jet took off, a woman with a baby got on and, you guessed it, they sat next to her. The baby was at that age to be too young for her own seat but too big to be easily controlled and comforted like an infant. The baby screamed, kicked, pulled at her computer and papers until she finally put her work away and gave an imploring look to the flight attendant who then banished the mother and child to a coach seat. After that everyone in first class went back to their important work, reading, resting, and she went back to writing about God. When Barbara Wheeler got to her speaking engagement, a brief homily was given before her speech. It was Christmas time and the text was the familiar story found in the second chapter of Luke. Then the person giving the homily went on to talk about the hymn "Away in a Manger" which is attributed to Martin Luther. He said that although it is a great Hymn, there is one line that is wrong. That is "little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes." He preached, we know Jesus cried, Jesus cried for all of us, Jesus even died for us!" Barbara Wheeler said that she felt that God spoke to her in the homily. She felt that the Holy Spirit had rebuked her for her intolerance and self importance. This homily transformed her. It made her reassess who she was in relation to God. As I read Dr Buchanan's editorial, what spoke to me about this story was that she was open to hearing God's message in the homily.

She was open to hearing God speak to her through a sermon. She must have been listening for God's word. Are we? Do we listen to sermons and enter into prayer really wanting to hear that God is speaking to us? Do we really want to hear what God is calling us to do? What if it is something uncomfortable? Is God speaking to us? We must finally listen as well.

I was in early grade school when Martin Luther King gave his famous "I have a Dream Speech" on the Mall in DC so I can not say I personally remember him and the events surrounding his ministry accurately. My memories of those events are clouded by the years of hearing the stories, of commentaries and the events that followed in the rest of the 60's and 70's in our country. And I realize that our children only know of him through history books and events that are planned to commemorate his message and build on his vision. But you talk to people who were there, who walked with Dr. King in Selma, in Chicago, in Philadelphia, or heard him preach and they heard something transforming, something great, and they HEARD God's word. The people who walked with him, talk about their experience of Dr. King as life transforming. God spoke to them through Dr. King's words and they were called into the movement of the times.

The first church I served was in Columbus. I was there in 1983 when we celebrated the 20th anniversary of Dr. King's "I have a Dream Speech". As the anniversary approached, a member of this very traditional congregation said to me that he would hire a bus to take as many of the members of the church to Washington for the commemorative celebration. I hoped that we would get enough interest to fill up a bus. Since it was in Columbus, I expected that the bus might be filled with OSU coeds. But to my surprise, the people who road all night in the THREE BUSES that ended up going from First Community Church were not activist college students. The people who rode all night on the buses to arrive at the march on Saturday with temperatures in the high 90's, who marched the mall, heard the speeches commemorating Martin Luther King and the speeches still rallying for fare wages and peace, and then who got back on the bus and traveled back to Columbus were the older members of the church. They had heard Martin Luther King's words the first time. Some had heard them in person. But all had heard the word of the lord in his message. They had been transformed. Is God speaking to us as well? Maybe we need to listen.

Some of you attended last Sunday's education forum, "Faith Matters". We watched a movie on the life and message of Martin Luther King Jr. The documentary had many film clips and news stories about Dr. King's ministry, and the movement he headed. Many people were interviewed as to their thoughts on his legacy. One interview stuck with me all week and I have been meditating and praying on it. Bill Cosby was defining what made Dr. King a great man. He said he was a man of dreams. He was a man who had dreams of God's vision and plan for creation. He dreamed of inclusiveness, of justice, of fair wages, and of peace. He was a man who had a dream but as Bill Cosby said, he was not a dreamer. A dreamer is someone who thinks the same thoughts but does not act. Dr. King had dreams, Dr King heard God speaking to him, and Dr. King acted. The message to us is, how can we be people who dream dreams too and are not merely dreamers?

Samuel did not recognize God calling him to be a prophet because it was not in his experience. He lived in a time when the Word and the Vision of the Lord was rare. God was summoning him, but he had nothing with which to recognize it and he certainly was not expecting it for himself. It took someone else to finally point out to him that God had made numerous attempts at reaching him. Once he knew that God was talking to him, he was able to hear God's voice clearly, was able to respond to God's call, and could be a prophetic voice for God.

We Presbyterians believe that God calls us together as a church. We believe that God has a purpose for our church and for us. God has a dream to show us and we are called to be active disciples, not dreamers. It seems the challenge is to position ourselves in a way so that we hear God calling us. We need to hear God's voice in a crying baby reminding us of Christ's suffering for us, we need to hear God's call in the Witness this morning for the Fair Wage Campaign. And we need to be open to seeing God's dream, knowing it might also be a calling to become a prophet in our own time a person pointing to God's vision of shalom, of justice and peace. Our prayer to God should be the same response as Samuel's; "Speak, for your servant is listening!" Amen.

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