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John 1:43-51
1 Samuel 3:1-10

Abington Presbyterian Church

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I love the story of Samuel. This account of the prophet Samuel's call in the temple is a Sunday School teacher's dream. It's dramatic and full of suspense, is easy to picture the story as it unfolds, and it's blessedly brief, which is always helpful with young children. But more importantly, it's one of only a handful of Bible stories in which a child plays the starring role.

My guess is, many of you here first encountered this story in Sunday School. And you would have heard the lessons you were supposed to absorb from it - lessons about going to church - Samuel heard God's voice *in the temple*; lessons about obeying your elders - Samuel did exactly as Eli instructed, and lessons about opening your heart to God - Samuel invited God to speak to him.

But it's clear there is much more to this story than we could understand as a child. First, we marvel that God didn't give up on Samuel. He called, called, and called again. He called until Samuel learned how to listen.

Second, according to the religious hierarchies of the day, the people who *should* have heard God's voice in this story were Eli and his sons. They were the authorities, the ultimate insiders by birth and by vocation. But they were not the ones God chose.

Instead, God chose Samuel. A *child*. Someone who was not yet a person of faith. So often in the modern church we can get preoccupied with qualifications, status, education, and rank. We'll want to see a resume and a few letters after someone's name before we issue a call—or we'll deny someone a position because they aren't technically "a member" or haven't been through confirmation yet. But, if the call of Samuel says anything—amidst all the calls of the Scriptures—it's that God calls whomever God decides to call, and oftentimes God calls the most unlikely of people.

In fact that seems to be the rule.

And, the gem that's buried in this text is that Eli knows this. Eli could have sent the boy off to bed, chiding him for his lack of faith, or his immaturity.

I mean really, what kind of God would call someone like Samuel?

...Or David, or Moses, or Mary, or Paul, or Peter.....or you and me?

What kind of God indeed!

Yesterday we celebrated the life and resurrection of Fred Shaffer here in our sanctuary. His son Gene shared that Fred had felt called to the ministry from an early age - from the time he was about 6 years old! He went through school, college and a year of seminary before he realized that his gifts were leading him to a different call. Fred was called to the business world. And so, he changed directions and followed his calling with gusto, and succeeded in the business world, even as he wove his deep faith into every aspect of his life.

I think the reality for most of us is that we don't expect to be called to anything, when in fact each one of us is called to many things – if we are listening. You may be called to be a teacher or a plumber, a husband or wife, a mother or father, a deacon or an elder, a sister or brother, and the list goes on and on. God's calling isn't limited to the clergy. God's call is to use your gifts with passion, and glorify God as you do so.

I wish the story of Samuel's call ended with verse 10 – with Samuel being called and saying he was listening, but the story continues. Listen ...

1 Samuel 3:11-20

¹¹Then the LORD said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. ¹²On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. ¹⁴Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever." ¹⁵Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. ¹⁶But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." ¹⁷Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." ¹⁸So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then Eli said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him."

¹⁹As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. ²⁰And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.

What Samuel hears from God is brutal. Eli knows it is God because Eli has heard that voice. God promises to punish Eli and his family, but asks Samuel to be the bearer of that bad news. Eli's sons have been blaspheming God by eating the choicest parts of the sacrificial animals, the parts that are to be given to God (1 Samuel 2:12-17), and Eli has failed to restrain them. Imagine being a young child, mentored by someone since your mother weaned you, and now you must speak condemning words regarding his leadership and his children.

No wonder Samuel was afraid. But he shared God's message.

There are many voices competing for our attention and how many of us can say that we really know God well enough to recognize a word as being from God or someone else? There is one thing we can know, however. The overwhelming witness of the prophets is that God has no tolerance for those who prey on the weak, who abuse their power, or who eat their fill while others are hungry. Perhaps the difficulty of this message is how easily it can apply to us. Are we in the position of Eli or, worse, his sons, eating our fill and denying both God and our neighbors their share?

This week, people around the world honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., America's great Civil Rights leader and prophet. King was an outsider, perfectly positioned to speak truth to power. Like Samuel, King was willing to make his listeners uncomfortable — even at great cost to himself.

In thinking about Samuel's call to share a hard message on God's behalf ... and MLK's message of justice and truth, I believe that we as Christians must speak out against violence, racism, intolerance and hatred. It's not OK in our families, in our churches, in our schools, in our government or in our country. Our call from God is clear – "**Love the LORD your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and **with all** your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" Luke 10:27 May we hear that Call and be ready to respond, "Speak, for your servant is listening."