

Call me: 1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

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by [Paul Keim](#) in the [January 11, 2003](#) issue

I don't carry a beeper or a cell phone. The services of professional biblical scholars rarely require that level of immediate access. No emergency calls to interpret an obscure passage. No rushing to the scene of a textual corruption. Yet it could happen. We are rapidly becoming a society "on call." Technology provides us with a constant flow of information. "Call me," our equipment says. "I'm here." So why not Semitic philologists on call. "Hello? Yes, I see. Let me just grab my triconsonantal root extractor and I'll be right there!"

In the midst of all this calling, how do we recognize God's voice calling us? Long ago, even before the rotary phone, the boy Samuel faced a similar dilemma. Calls from Yahweh were rare. But as a child pledged to service in the temple of Yahweh at Shiloh, Samuel was called by name at all times of day and night. On one particular night the boy hears his name called and responds, "Hello? Yes? Here I am. What do you want?"

If you're Eli, you're not sleeping that well when the boy comes trotting in to disturb you with his nonsense. Now even the pretense of slumber is gone; it's just you and your premonitions, a vague sense of doom hanging over you, and the Lord silent as only the Lord can be silent. Prophets wouldn't know a vision anymore if it bit them in the behind. So what's eating the kid? Indigestion? Fleas? Those worthless, carousing sons of yours? No, that boy is sharp. Maybe this is one of those rare cases of a divine call. If it happens again, you'd better instruct the boy how to respond. Just in case.

If you're Samuel, you think it must be the old man. But the temple lamp hasn't even burned out yet, too early for him to be calling for the vessel. He says he didn't call? What? You suspect his eyesight isn't the only thing fading fast. Then there it is

again. And again he denies calling you.

This episode is framed by two oracles: the priestly house of Eli is about to fall because of corruption, and a new priest, this Samuel, will be consecrated in his place. The house of this new priest will eventually also fail the test of faithful succession. But for now Eli provides the guidance Samuel needs to hear the call. This role of mentor, facilitator and arbiter of God's call is crucial to the story. He encourages and instructs Samuel to listen and tells him what to say, then forces the reluctant youth to articulate the message, even though it presages his own doom.

In our day, the word of the Lord is cheap, visions are widespread and telemarketers call us by name. How do we distinguish God's call? Who will play Eli for us and reorient our attention so that we become able receptors of the divine vocation? Can we discern when the tossings and turnings and confusions of the young are actually unrecognized, unarticulated vocations? Are we providing them with the disciplines of heart and mind to listen and to act? Consider Samantha, who hears a call. Imagine Eli saying, "No, it can't be a call to pastoral ministry. You must be mistaken. Go back, teach, write, nurture. That's your vocation."

The calling of Nathanael is less direct—mediated by Philip in the form of an enthusiastic invitation to follow the One from Nazareth. But Nathanael knows Nazareth. Nazareth is Nowhere. Nazareth is Nothing. A Nazarean is a Nobody. A Nichtsnutz.

When I was a kid, the label "made in Japan" signified a cheap trinket that cost little and was worth even less. It was a common term of derision applicable to any product shoddily made or easily broken. But by the time I was in college, the reputation of Japanese technology and workmanship was already being transformed. Now "made in Japan" signifies quality and reliability in a whole range of products.

Nathanael's assumptions about the impossibility of a divine call from Nazareth had to undergo similar transformation. This time Philip is the catalyst who overcomes Nathanael's categorical dismissal: Come and see! *Venit. Vedit. Variatus est.* Nathanael came, saw and was changed in an encounter made possible by a Philipian invitation and a Philipian coax.

A sense of calling represents a step toward greater self-awareness. To become aware of a call is to be aware of oneself in a new way, as the psalmist was aware: You know me, O Lord. You've done the research. You've read my file. Through the

call I know myself as someone known; my life as something comprehended from beginning to end; my days as already written in that book “when none of them as yet existed.” This is no recipe for fatalistic determinism, but rather a profound metaphor providing a way out of the modern dilemma. In the place of an alienated self at the center of an arbitrary, amoral universe, or a postmodern ghost trying to conjure up its name through myriad manipulations, we choose to live as those known and called by name.

Of course, every call to something may also be a call away from something. The call that led me to graduate studies coincided with an awareness that teaching high school was not my vocation. This message was brought home in an episode that was tantamount to an out-of-the-body experience. At the end of another exasperating day I found myself looking down from a vantage point somewhere near the ceiling of my small classroom at a guy wearing my clothes who was vigorously admonishing a hapless student sitting near the back of the Bible class. Watching the event unfold from this neutral perspective worked as an epiphany. The writing on the wall was ominous but also strangely comforting: Mene. Mene. Tekel. I was off to seminary.