

A word and a calling: 1 Sam. 3:1-20; John 1:43-51

Reading the call of Samuel, one wonders why the lectionary confronts us with such a dread epiphany.

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Recently I watched a PBS series on the Book of Genesis with a dozen older women at a retirement home. The segment dealt with Abram's call, how the Lord said to Abram, "Go," and he went. We heard Lewis Smedes wonder aloud whether a tape recorder would have picked up a real "voice" of the Lord back then. Afterward, I asked the women if they felt Abram had heard a clearer voice when the Lord spoke to him than what we might hear today. They were hesitant to speak about it. Finally one woman tentatively offered the experience of her husband, a retired pastor afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. "If you ask him who he is, he says he's a pastor. When I say, 'Where's your congregation?' sometimes he looks at me blankly, but other times he makes a sweeping gesture with his arm, as though taking in the entire world."

Many of us find it hard to perceive the voice of the Lord. I have a great affection for 1 Samuel 3:1: "The word of the Lord was rare in those days, and there were no frequent visions." We seem relieved to have confirmation that the word of the Lord is difficult to hear. Ah, yes, we might say to our congregations, isn't the word of the Lord rare again these days? But perhaps our real affection for that verse is a more complex response to the whole story of Samuel and Eli, maybe even relief at the poignant rendering of our own secret dread: that although the word of the Lord is clear enough in fact, Eli found it painful or difficult to keep listening. It is Eli who realizes that Samuel is hearing the voice of the Lord, Eli who tells Samuel how to open himself up to the word. It is Eli who pushes past Samuel's fear of what he has heard, and Eli who registers no surprise when he hears what the Lord has to say.

One might wonder why the lectionary confronts us with such a dread epiphany. Having survived the watchfulness and wakefulness of Advent, having arrived at the joy of the humble birth, must we immediately preach the strenuous message of the prophets? Must we again point out that we are hard of hearing and hard of heart, that the word of the Lord is rare, not because the Lord has withdrawn from us, but because we have convinced ourselves that we hear nothing?

On first reading, the story is devastating to Eli, and he takes it with the calm resignation of an elderly outlaw whose life has become the ritual dread of waiting to be caught. But on second reading, the story offers an image of great hope: "Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; [but] the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was." We know from Exodus 27:21 that the lamp of God burned all night. But the writer does not tell us that it was nearly dawn; rather, he tells us that the lamp of God was still flickering inside the temple. And though Eli was now frail and blind (one imagines him lying down with great effort and care), young Samuel was sleeping lightly in the temple with the ark of God.

Scholars point out similarities between the lyrical stories of Samuel's birth and childhood and Luke's stories of Jesus' advent and youth. But the lectionary takes us into the good news via another route, a route which acknowledges both the pathetic conduct of Eli and the rare intelligence and promise of Samuel.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, we read the story of Nathaniel's call as a disciple. Nathaniel is credited with articulating everyone's private suspicion: that nothing good could come from the undistinguished town of Nazareth. He is recognized by Jesus as "one in whom there is no guile, no deceit;" but Nathaniel is more impressed that Jesus somehow espied him under the fig tree before Philip had spoken to him. "Rabbi, you are the Son of God!" Nathaniel unwittingly proclaims. In Jesus' reply, one is given the impression that for a moment the Lord is stunned and amused by his newest disciple's capacity to know him and yet not know him at all, to see and hear, yet not quite perceive.

At the conclusion of 1 Samuel 3, we are told that as Samuel grew up the Lord was with him "and let none of his words fall to the ground." In the same way, Nathaniel's open skepticism and his impressionable naïveté were not deterrents to the Word which Jesus had become. For we will not be saved by our capacity to know where we

are, or who we are or what exactly we hear. We will be saved by the persistent word of the Lord, by such faithfulness toward us even when we are slow and doubtful and hard of hearing that we may know that it must have been (and continues to be) God with us. The good news is that even an epiphany is a lifelong calling.

I'm fond of a little paragraph written by St. Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth century. Cyril wrote his prebaptismal lesson for his catechumens, whom he called "photizomenoi" (those being enlightened). He vividly describes the assurance with which the word of the Lord works -- even on those who know but do not yet know.

Perhaps you have come for some other reason? A man may want to please a woman and may come for that reason. The same may be true of 'a woman. . . or a friend [may come to please] a friend. I take whatever is on the hook, I pull you in, you who came with an evil intention but will be saved by your hope of the good. Doubtless you did not know, did you, where you were going, and did not recognize the net in which you have been caught? You have been caught in the church's net! Jesus has you on his hook, not to cause your death but to give you life after putting you to death. . . . Begin today to live!