

Call Waiting
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Epiphany 2B
1 Samuel 3:1-10

Have you noticed that the lectionary readings for today are all about call? God calls Samuel's name in the middle of the night; Philip comes to Nathanael, calling him to come meet Jesus; the Psalmist writes about being called before he was even born. It's enough to make you stop and consider your own call.

When people ask me how I was called into ministry I always tell them the same story. My father-in-law, who was also my pastor, took me out for a steak dinner one night. I had been working as a part-time youth minister in the church for a couple of years and enjoying it. I liked being with the kids in the youth group and liked helping out in worship on Sunday mornings. We talked about that for a while and then he said, "Jim, have you ever considered pastoral ministry?" "No," I said. "I haven't." But do you know that from that moment on I began to consider it? When my father-in-law told me he was going to a nearby seminary for a visit and invited me to come along I went, and asked every student I met how they knew they were called. I didn't get many satisfying answers. They said they had just always thought they would go into the ministry or they didn't know what else to do after college. I wanted something more than that. I wanted trumpets to sound one morning and a scroll to roll down from the ceiling and a voice to announce: "Jim Somerville, go into the ministry!"

It didn't happen like that.

It was a much quieter call, so quiet, in fact, that no one else could have heard it. And the truth is, I wouldn't have heard it either if my father-in-law hadn't helped me, if he hadn't tuned my radio to that particular frequency. Several years later, when I was being ordained, I told the

examining council that as Eli was to Samuel, so was Bill Treadwell to me, helping me to hear and answer God's call.

But what if he was wrong? What if it wasn't God calling me at all? What if Bill just saw in me the kind of gifts that could be used in ministry and asked me to consider that possibility? What if those same gifts could be used to sell shoes? Those kinds of questions can keep you up at night, especially if it's been a hard day in the ministry. Selling shoes can begin to look pretty appealing. And if you don't have a rock-solid sense of conviction about your call you may begin to waver. "Maybe God didn't call me. Maybe it was just my imagination. Maybe I should try something else."

Years ago my wife, Christy, read a news article about yet another pastor who had failed his congregation, had an affair, and run off with the church organist. She looked at me and said, "If it's God who calls people into ministry why does he call some good ones and some bad ones? Why doesn't he call all good ones?" It was a legitimate question, and I thought about it for the rest of that day. The next morning I got up and wrote in my journal, "Maybe it's not that God calls some good ministers and some bad ones. Maybe God calls all of us, and has to make do with the ones who say yes." It was a radical, probably heretical, thought, but I couldn't stop thinking it. For the next few weeks I wondered, "What if God calls all of us, and has to make do with the ones who say yes?" I even mentioned that idea to a few people in this congregation who seemed to have the right kind of gifts for ministry. "Oh, great," they said. "Now if I don't become a minister it means I'm saying no to God?"

That couldn't be right.

Surely God isn't calling every person in the world to "full-time vocational ministry" as we call it. The pulpit would get a little crowded if all of you were up here and no one was out

there. But in a broader sense could we assume that God is calling every person in the world to himself, to some kind of service, and waiting to see what their response will be? It's a question that leads us all the way back to what theologians call "the doctrine of election."

Election is more about salvation than about call: it has to do with whom God has chosen to save or not to save. Different theologians approach the question in different ways. John Calvin, you may remember, believed in something called "double predestination," in which God chose some to go to heaven and some to go to hell. The choice was entirely up to him and had nothing to do with us. You couldn't be good enough or bad enough to sway his judgment. He just knew, from the beginning, how things were supposed to turn out for you and, from the beginning, your fate was sealed (in Calvin's estimation about 20 percent of the population was on its way to heaven and the other 80 percent were headed to hell. Those odds are not very good, but they do seem to reflect the way things are in the world: about one in five people really seem to know and love God enough to want to spend eternity with him). If you apply this kind of thinking to the question of call it would make sense to believe that God calls some people and doesn't call others and there isn't much we can do about it one way or another. John Calvin would probably say that if God has called you to be a minister you won't be able to say no to him. But that doesn't answer Christy's question of why there are some good ministers and some bad ones.

And so we turn to the idea of Universalism. Like double predestination this view emphasizes God's sovereignty, but instead of choosing to save some and condemn others God chooses to save everyone. It's a very appealing view. It seems consistent with our understanding of a good and loving God who doesn't want anyone to perish. Doesn't John 3:16 say that "God so loved the world that he gave his only son" for whosoever might believe? It doesn't say that he

only loved part of the world, the part he was going to save. And “whosoever” would seem to include anyone who can believe. So, when I was in seminary I asked one of the resident theologians why God didn’t just save everybody. “Because it would take away our freedom,” he said. “God loves us and wants to save us, but if we decide we would rather go to hell we have to be free to go. Our freedom is as important as God’s sovereignty.”

Which brings us to a third view, a kind of middle position in which God’s sovereignty and our freedom are held in the balance. Theologian Shirley Guthrie describes it like this: “We are all unworthy, undeserving sinners. We not only leave undone many things we ought to have done; even the good we do is corrupted by sinful motives, desires, and goals. We are totally dependent on the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ for our salvation. But although it is true that we are not free and able to save ourselves by our good works, we are free and able to do one thing. We can acknowledge our *need* for God’s grace and turn to God to *ask* for the deep, abiding faith, hope, and love we cannot achieve for ourselves. We can confess Christ as Lord and Savior and show our willingness to *receive* the salvation made available to us in him. We can *allow* the transforming power of God’s Holy Spirit to come into our hearts. We can go to church in order to express our *desire* for the help and salvation we know comes only from God. We cannot save ourselves, but we can do that much if we really want to. And if we choose God and turn to God in this way, God will choose us, love, help, and save us. If some do not receive this saving grace, it is not because God has rejected them; it is because they have rejected God. Salvation is by God’s grace alone, available to all who sincerely ask for it and want it.”

It is this third view, a view Guthrie calls “Semi-Pelagianism,” that succeeds in holding God’s sovereignty and human freedom in the balance, and it also provides some insight into the question of call. You don’t have to agree with this view, of course. My tradition is Baptist, and

Baptists are free to come to their own conclusions about salvation. Some Baptists these days have shifted toward a strict Calvinism, including the doctrine of double predestination. I can't do that. I can't believe that God would arbitrarily choose to damn anyone, much less 80 percent of the population. When I read Guthrie's description of Semi-Pelagianism (even though I didn't really care for the title) I found myself writing "Yes, Yes, Yes!" in the margin. And I thought, "If this is the way God works in salvation, then maybe it is also the way God works in vocation. Maybe he does call everyone, and then waits for us to say yes."

My mother told me an interesting story once. She said that when she was younger she wanted to be a career missionary, and so she scheduled an appointment with her denomination's missionary sending agency. "Can you tell us about your experience of call?" they asked. "I didn't know you had to be called," she answered. "I thought the Bible said, 'Go ye into all the world and make disciples.' It's a good point. Why should we have to have some mysterious experience of call to do what Christ has clearly called us to do already? But notice that I said "Us." When Jesus said, "Go ye into all the world and make disciples," he wasn't talking to just anybody, but to those people who had already responded to his call. Beside the Sea of Galilee and from a tax collector's booth and various other places Jesus had called his disciples to follow him and they had left everything to do so. Some had, at least. The Gospel of Luke, at the end of chapter 9, records the sad story of three would-be disciples, who wanted to follow Jesus but not enough to take the plunge. And each of the synoptic Gospels records the story of the rich young ruler who walked away from Jesus' invitation to follow because he couldn't give up his wealth. The word that is used for the church in the Greek New Testament is the word *ekklesia*, which means "the called out." As I understand it, we are the ones who have been called out of the world and into the Kingdom, and somewhere along the way we had to say yes.

God is not the kind to force us into his church, or into his Kingdom, or into his service, or into his heaven. He calls. He waits. He calls. He waits. Some of us hear his voice and say yes. Some of us hear his voice and say no. Some of us keep listening and find that God keeps calling, always calling, us into deeper relationship and more faithful service and always waiting to see if we will say yes or no. If you can tune your radio to that frequency I think you will hear him calling you as he called Samuel, and if you are very brave you can answer as Samuel did:

“Speak, Lord, for your servant heareth.”

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