

God Calling

Text: I Samuel 3:1-10

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on September 19, 2021

After worship this morning we're finally having the reception to welcome the Schiappas that we were supposed to have back in August, when they joined the church and I baptized Elizabeth Ruth and Hurricane Henri decided to postpone the after-church celebration.

That Sunday I preached about the Covenant of Baptism in particular and about what covenants are in general. This week I want to begin to pull on one of those other covenant threads to talk about calling and purpose. I'll hit this theme several times in the next month, so if you missed the sermon on the Covenant of Baptism, I encourage you to go to our YouTube channel, either directly or through the sermons page on the website, and watch it. It was on Aug. 22 of this year.

Remember that covenants are the way that we recognize and welcome others into the various sets of families to which we belong, marriage being one of the earliest covenants in human history. Covenants aren't contracts that begin and end when terms are met; they're meant to be permanent. You weren't family before; but with this covenant, with its visible sign and in the presence of witnesses, you are family now.

Baptism, with its sign of water, brings people into the Christian family. The law of Moses, with its sign of keeping the Sabbath, brings people into the family of Israel. Both of them sit under the arc of the rainbow, which is the sign of the covenant in the story of Noah, which made all living things part of the family of God.

That first biblical covenant with Noah in Genesis 9 covers everything that comes later. It's never superseded and remains the guiding principle for all subsequent covenants. God considers every living thing on the earth—human, animal, plant, the very earth itself, all of it—to be part of one family; the family of God.

We can make more particular covenants within that frame that are specific to our families, cultures, and religion. But if any of those smaller covenants stand in opposition to the understanding that the earth and all who dwell therein are joined with us as part of God's divine family, we have broken the very heart of God—the fundamental understanding of what God has made; the calling and purpose of Creation itself. If we break that first covenant, we've broken them all; because God's adoption of all of Creation as beloved family is the foundational understanding for all of them.

You know from my initial sermons here how important I think the earliest chapters of Genesis are. While I don't read them literally; I read them seriously, with the understanding that God is speaking through those authors to give us Truth about God's dream for Creation and for the mortals made in God's image. Those chapters are not trying to give us scientific or historical facts. Truth and facts are related, but are ultimately different things; and when you can leave aside the questions about whether they are factual and read the origin stories of the Hebrew people through the much larger lens of Truth, they will blow your socks off.

It's in these ancient stories that we find the boundaries for evaluating whether God has called us to this thing or that thing and whether something we're considering fits within God's purpose for our lives. We need those boundaries, because it's a wild world out there when people start marching

around saying God has called them to do whatever they're doing. If you think that claim isn't used to manipulate people; well, God called me to sell you a bridge.

So how do we sort it out—either for ourselves or for the claims made by others? Jesus gives us an excellent measure by saying, “By their fruit you shall know them.” But long before that, here in the pre-history of Israel, the lines for evaluating good and bad fruit are drawn. Genesis 1 tells us humans are made in God's image and have dominion over the earth. What does that mean exactly? Genesis 2 starts to tell us.

In Genesis 1, humans are created last. But in Genesis 2, God makes Adam first, then creates everything else, and tells Adam in verse 15 that his job is to serve and protect it all. So, just like the covenant after the flood is the basis for understanding all other covenants; Genesis 2:15 is the basis for understanding all human vocation. At its most basic level, the calling of every human being begins with the service to and protection of all the rest of creation.

That vocation—that calling—given to Adam in Genesis 2:15 is the thing that is sealed for all time and all people in God's covenant with Noah in Genesis 9. It's a hard boundary for examining a call. Every calling and every covenant have to meet that threshold to be considered God's work. It must somehow further serving and protecting the earth and the family of all living things.

When we blessed the ground on the first Sunday of this month, we acted out both that calling and that covenant. When we bless the animals on October 3, we will again act in accordance with both that calling and that covenant. When we accepted Ginny, Andrew, and Elizabeth Ruth Schiappa into our church family at Crawford last month, we welcomed them with the understanding of our place within God's universal covenant and calling. The calling of God, for you or for anyone else, assumes that foundation. It's the two-factor authentication of God's call. Serve and protect Creation; and treat all that lives within it as family. If it doesn't check out, let it go to voicemail. It's a scammer.

With that understanding complete at the end of Genesis 9, the Bible's roster of characters explodes, and we hear about God calling people with all kinds of work to be done. And it's not just people. God also calls two donkeys and bunch of ravens, not to mention pressing two bodies of water and the sun itself into service.

But the calling that captivated me as a child was the one about a child; the one you heard this morning, the story of Samuel. Samuel's mother was named Hannah, and her husband was just a random guy from the Israelite tribe of Ephraim. Hannah was unable to have children; something that tore at her heart enough that she went to the temple at Shiloh daily to pray for a child. This was before the Temple in Jerusalem was built.

In her prayers, Hannah promised God that if she were given a son, she would apprentice him to a priest to work full time for God. Her prayers were so intense that Eli, the priest at Shiloh, thought she was drunk and reprimanded her. When she explained her distress to Eli, he told her that God would grant her request. She conceived and Samuel was born. Hannah's prayer of praise in 1 Samuel 2 is often compared to Mary's Magnificat.

But that great gift meant great sacrifice. True to her word, as soon as Samuel was weaned—somewhere between 3-5 years old—she gave him to Eli to serve God in the temple. She was allowed to see her son only once per year after that. So, when young Samuel hears something in the middle

of the night, he can't go to his mother or father. His only guide is this priest who was already best known for thinking his mother's desperate prayer was her showing up to the temple drunk.

It takes Eli a few tries here, too. Samuel keeps going back into Eli's room and waking him up. "Someone called me. Did you call me?" "No, go back to bed." "Hi again, did you call me? Someone called me." "I told you, no, go back to bed." Knock, knock. "Here I am, you definitely called me." Finally, Eli gets it together and recognizes that it is God calling Samuel and tells him how to respond when the call comes again. Eli tells Samuel to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

I was mesmerized by that story as a child. God called Samuel—by name. And God didn't give up until Samuel was able to understand who was calling and respond. I can't tell you how many nights I went to bed saying, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening," because I wanted to hear from God. I wanted that more than anything. I never heard the audible voice that Samuel heard. But by the time I was 14 and found myself standing in the pulpit of the North Scituate Baptist Church to preach for youth Sunday, I heard God in my heart confirming that this was how I was to serve for the rest of my life—to preach God's love as a member of the clergy.

The downside of both my calling and Samuel's though, is that when others try to listen for God's call in their own lives, they often assume that God's call must be to some form of explicitly religious service. Because it's those of us in religious professions who are usually sharing those experiences. But that very first call to Adam is as broad as it is universal. Serve and protect Creation. There are as many different ways to do that as there are people; and no one way is better than another. Every calling of God is holy by default.

But calling isn't only, or even primarily about what we do. Our initial calling is not to a job, but to a relationship with the One who made us. It is first a call to discipleship. Sometimes people have trouble discerning God's call for their lives because they're listening for a job to do instead of a person to become.

I felt my calling to ordained ministry when I was 14, but that by no means meant that I was ready to be deployed as a minister at age 14. I would have been a menace to the Gospel. I was still a menace at 24, even though I meant well. Discerning that God is calling you to be a doctor may be absolutely right; but it doesn't mean you can safely perform heart surgery without adequate training.

Abraham was 75 years old when God called him. Moses was a murderer at age 40 and had to spend the next 40 years tending sheep before God could use him at age 80 to liberate the Hebrew slaves. Paul was likely in his early to mid 20's when he was knocked off his horse on the road to Damascus, but he had to spend the next 14 years back home in Tarsus unlearning his old ways before God could send him on his first missionary journey. Even Jesus didn't begin his ministry until he was 30, and he only did so then because his mother insisted on more wine for some wedding guests.

Young Samuel was actively working in the temple but hadn't yet learned to recognize God's voice. It would be many more years of learning to distinguish God's voice above the voice of the crowd before Samuel the child could become the prophet in the book that bears his name. But the real start of his journey was when he followed Eli's advice, went back to his room and said, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." He answered the phone and said yes to the relationship, which is where it all begins.

If you haven't yet heard God's call on your life, it could be because you don't know what you're listening for. Or maybe you didn't even know God was calling in the first place. You thought all that ringing was just robocalls. Go find Eli. He might be slow on the uptake; but he gets it eventually. Talk to somebody who has some experience in hearing from God; learn the ways God has spoken to them. You might be surprised at what you discover. Pretty soon, just like those who pay attention to birds learn to distinguish the call of the chickadee from the call of the cardinal, you'll find that messages from God are more plentiful than you thought.

God is calling you. By name. Can you hear it? Will you hear it? It's the call that will change your life, so you have to want that in order to hear. But the call won't go away, no matter how many times you go ask Eli if it was him. If the line is busy, God will call back or send a text. If the phone is off, God will try email or the voice of a friend or the chattering of a squirrel. Have you ever really answered? Have you ever actually stopped and said, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening?" Amen.