

Proper 4, Year B; 1Samuel 3:1-10 (calling of Samuel)

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Over this past Memorial Day weekend, for the first time in my life, I cleaned a urinal. Actually, I sanitized several urinals, plus two bathrooms, and a few outdoor shower stalls. I washed two expansive wood floors with Murphy's Oil Soap, scoured a kitchen, shook out an enormous door mat, and glided a squeegee up and down countless windows – inside and out. The occasion was an annual work weekend up at the Twin Cities YMCA's Camp du Nord. Du Nord is my family's happy place, and we have been camping there, on the bucolic shores of Burntside Lake, in the Boundary Waters Canoe and Wilderness Area for 15 years. We're so hard core that every year we trudge up to camp, with the other true believers, to spend 4 days alongside millions of biting black flies readying camp for its 12-week summer program.

Introvert that I am, I predictably select a job that will take the entire weekend to complete, a job that I can do largely by myself. While everyone else is readying the garden, or clearing brush, stacking firewood or hauling muck out of sailboats, I strap on my iPhone, select a delicious book on Audible, and get to work. This year I took on Morning Glory – a community center-type building on the far end of camp. Over the summer it houses soap-making workshops, art projects, yoga sessions, evening presentations about the lives of bears and the ways of wolves. When not in use, it serves as a bit of a hangout for teenagers, providing relief from the close-quarters of family cabins and platform tents. Sometimes it's a quiet place where introverts can go to read and not talk to anyone else. Last summer I took a book there, only to discover three other people reading silently, sitting as far away from each other as possible. I thought to myself: "my people," as I made no eye contact, chose a couch, and settled in.

Meanwhile at work weekend, I eventually grew bored with the book I was listening to, and continued cleaning without distraction. For the better part of a day, I slipped into a kind of prayerful state – mopping the floors and thinking about the hundreds of people who will enjoy there a "downward dog" yoga pose this summer, or learn something cool about the north woods, or recreate with a mystery or a conversation or a ping pong game.

I also prayed for Dr. Jean Boening, the du Nord board member and Twin Cities physician who financed most of the buildings in that part of camp, including the one I was cleaning. Her image is memorialized on a small plaque by the side door, a photo of her perched on a greenstone outcropping with a wide smile and bright eyes. Her last board meeting was only a week before she died, so dedicated she was to the strengthening of families, and the Y's core values of trust, respect, and responsibility. I thought I might contact the one family member of hers that I know, Paul, after the weekend, to tell him that I was praying for Jean as I cleaned every crevice of the building she lovingly built. But then I thought better of it – no, the prayers were for Jean, between me and God, not something to be thanked for by a grateful relative or given credit for doing. And I thought better about trumpeting the glistening building that I left behind. I didn't tell any of the staff what I had done for the past three days, hoping for a kind of "Elves & the Shoemaker" effect – a happy and unexpected surprise to be discovered on the first morning of summer family camp, in gleaming urinals and the view of the lake, now visible through crystal-clean

windows. Driving home I felt full and happy, having spent my weekend preparing a space for others to grow and relax and connect.

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” Our holy scriptures are chock full of call stories, from the Creator’s “where are you?” in the garden of Eden, to YHWH’s addressing Moses out of the burning bush, to Isaiah’s vision in the temple, to the voice declaring its delight in Jesus as he is washed in the River Jordan. Each story portrays God calling people -- to service, to prophetic ministry, to justice -- and each story is perhaps a model by which we can think of ourselves as called by God, although I would imagine none of our stories are nearly as dramatic as Samuel’s.

God calls Samuel *three* times – though Samuel thinks it’s old Eli calling, until Eli figures it out for the both of them. Samuel’s call story is framed by a disastrous war in which the Israelites are defeated by the Philistines and, in the process, lose the arc of the covenant. Into this crucible of harsh judgement, war, and loss comes the call of God, “rare in those days,” as we are told in the passage. In this instance, God calls not to the learned, nor to the religious leaders, nor to the powerful, but to an unsuspecting boy. God calls the boy Samuel in the midst of trouble. It’s a story about call. It’s a story about listening. And it’s a story about response. “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,” Samuel says. The boy grows up and goes forth to serve a pivotal role in the rise of the ancient Israelite monarchy. He will anoint Saul, then David. His name will be proclaimed and remembered.

I have to admit that in all the biblical call stories, there seems to be an intensity not present in my personal experience, maybe yours, too. The narratives portray God’s prophetic call to unsuspecting people in mythic proportions, with more heat, more urgency, and invariably more at stake. It seems that every instance, including Samuel’s, entails the commissioning of the prophet for some crushing burden. There is bad news to deliver, or armies massing on the borders, or a foreign ruler preparing to invade, or a local king who has abandoned the God of Israel and gone chasing after other gods, or people who have turned their backs on God. There are lost and devastated people to lead through the wilderness, and later a Roman Empire to confront. These days, God’s call to us seems more domesticated, many times taking on the trappings of career choices. Decisions to respond to God’s call today are often made based on means, convenience, resources, available opportunities, job listings, desire to relocate or not, admission to one’s choice of college or seminary. Rarely, if ever, do we experience or hear about a burning bush that calls us to deliver the people, or descending doves that propels us to travel and preach.

But maybe, in all of God’s wisdom, the format and setting for call has changed to fit our times, but God’s call is as urgent and high stakes as ever. In her seminal book, *The Preaching Life*, Barbara Brown Taylor spends quite a bit of time exploring the aspect of call, and listening, and response. “One midnight,” she writes, “I asked God to tell me as plainly as possible what I was supposed to do. ‘Anything that pleases you.’ That is the answer that came into my sleepy head. ‘What?’ I said, waking up. ‘What kind of answer is that?’ ‘Do anything that pleases you,’ the voice in my head said again, ‘and belong to me.’ That simplified things considerably. I could pump gas in Idaho or dig latrines in Pago Pago, as far as God was concerned, as long as I remembered whose I was.”

“If my own experience can be trusted,” she writes, “then God does not call us once but many times. There are calls to faith and calls to jobs, but in between there are calls to particular communities and calls to particular tasks within them – calls into and out of relationships as well as calls to seek God wherever God may be found. Sometimes those calls ring clear as bells and sometimes they are barely

audible, but in any case, we are not meant to hear them all by ourselves. It is part of God's genius to incorporate us as one body, so that our ears have other ears, other eyes, minds, hearts, and voices to help us interpret what we have heard."

I like to think of it like this. There is an old Hasidic creation story that says that when God was creating the earth, he gathered up all the stars and planets he could find and flung them into the sky as hard as he could, scattering them far and wide. God told the people that every time they performed an act of kindness, or compassion, or hospitality, or justice one star would be collected and returned to him. "Your task," God told the people, "is to spend your lives collecting all of those stars." That's call. That's listening. That's response.

So, what pleases you? What gives you life and energy and hope? What of those things serves other people in the doing, or makes things just a little bit better, or returns one tiny star to God? As we progressively disperse to our respective summer destinations, I encourage you to spend some time reflecting and asking. To what are you being called, in that moment, in your daily life, in the future? And then, wait and listen. Wait and listen. If that doesn't feel comfortable, or doable, then avail yourself, at any opportunity, for any service that presents itself, no matter how small, or inconsequential.

The Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg explains it this way: "I once complained to my teacher about being unable to maintain a regular practice. 'When I sit at home and meditate and it feels good, I'm exhilarated and I have faith and I know that it's the most important thing in my life. But as soon as it feels bad, I stop. I'm disheartened and discouraged so I just give up.' He gave me quite a wonderful piece of advice. 'Just put your body there. Your mind will do different things all of the time, but you just put your body there. Because that's the expression of commitment, and the rest will follow from that.'"

All of our faith ancestors had one thing in common: they put their body there. And there they were, present and awake (even if God had to repeat it or set a bush on fire) when the call came.

Sources:

Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3 (Pentecost and Season after Pentecost), pp. 74-79.

Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, pp. 23-24.

Sharon Salzberg, *Real Happiness: The Power of Meditation*, p. 187.