



Voices in the Night

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett
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Ordinary 2 (Year B)

1 Samuel 3:1-10; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

People who count such things tell us that the average citizen of the United States will have five different vocations before their working lives are complete. Some will have to do this simply to stay employed as technology makes former jobs obsolete, or trends put them behind the business power-curve.

Others will make a change simply because they are fed up with the “rat race.” They got “there,” as one driven manager expressed it, only to find there was no there, there. Bigger and better barns were not better. Too much was being lost in the race to succeed. Most of these will seek “second careers,” doing something completely new. What is new today is that in many cases these “second career” folk will go through a third or fourth “second career” before it is over.

This is especially true of many who go off to seminary seeking ministry as a second career. Within three to five years, they are looking for a second, “second career.” Ministry did not turn out to be what they expected. They had envisioned lots of time to study, pray and write sermons, and days filled with conversations about spiritual matters. The routine of committee meetings, budgets, telephone calls from members upset over this or that, fund raising, building maintenance and staff management, combined with a Sunday morning deadline that comes with disturbing regularity, was not what they had expected. And so, within three to five years they are looking to do something else. For these folks it is especially difficult. Was it God calling them? Or, were they confused about that? What is it God wants us to do with our lives? Does God really have a call for each of us, and if so, how do we hear it? God has our number, but are we listening?

The call of Samuel is one of the great Old Testament stories. God calls Samuel, out of the blue, and Samuel doesn’t have a clue. We can excuse it for Samuel because he is just a boy, and, as the biblical writer tells us, “The word of the Lord was rare in those days.” But notice that not even Eli, the priest, was all that perceptive. It took three times before Eli awakened to who might be calling the boy. Only then could he prepare Samuel for God’s call.

Of the many points made in this story, one which is important for us today is that when God calls us, it is always more than a private moment. There is always an Eli around to help us with it, who can confirm it. Often it is those closest to us.

In my own case, it was only slowly that I came to hear the voice of God calling me. I did feel the nudging of the Spirit often in my childhood and youth, and I remember talking about those stirrings with my youth leaders—which is why that particular ministry within the congregation is vitally important. Our young people in the church need adults in their life who will let them test their faith and who will love them without qualification.

Perhaps God’s Spirit is nudging you to join our team of adults working with our youth. I cannot thank our youth leaders enough.

I also talked with my pastor. I especially remember the afternoon we spent at his kitchen table just before I went off to college. I was going to be a forestry major, but I was beginning to feel more strongly the call to ministry.

I will be forever grateful that he reminded me that ministry could take place in a variety of ways, and that I didn’t have to become an ordained pastor to minister for the sake of the gospel. And he talked with me about ways I might discern what God was calling me to do with my life.

And so it was, as I’ve told you before, that I heard God’s voice calling me to ministry while I was sitting alone in the middle of the forest counting squirrels. I am convinced that my prior conversations with youth leaders and my pastor helped me to hear God’s voice more clearly that day.

Looking back, I have also come to realize what a gift my parents gave me. Not only did they ensure that I was in church, they also showed the importance of the faith in their own lives—not only in their service in the congregation, but in their spirits. While they surely recognized our pastors’ shortcomings—even failings—over the years, they never for a moment questioned their commitment or faith. They consistently honored the office of pastor—just as they did the office of elder—which made it much easier for me to consider that calling.

When I finally sat down again with my pastor, to tell him that I was changing my major and would be entering seminary after college, Bob spent the first hour challenging me, trying to talk me out of it, being pretty frank about what ministry was really like. I’ve always blessed Bob for that. But as the conversation continued, he confirmed what I had experienced, and added his blessing.

It would not be the last time my sense of call would be challenged. There was a seminary to get through. There was a Presbytery committee to deal with. There was Greek, Hebrew, three years of graduate work, field work every Sunday – each a place where the reality of that call was being tested. That was followed by the first call to a church, ordination, and those first few years immersed in the day-to-day realities of parish ministry, and always, Sunday coming with disturbing regularity. When God calls us to such things, there are always people around us to confirm or help cross-check our reality. God never calls in a vacuum. Samuel needed Eli’s confirmation and so do you and I.

But there is a more fundamental way God calls us – each of us.

All of us are called to be Christ’s person. That is our vocation. We are called to do that, whether that means in the forests or the university, in the boardroom or classroom, as a parent, doctor, technician, lawyer, business person, student, pastor, writer, musician, secretary, word processor, teacher, full-time volunteer. Our vocation is to be Christ’s person, to bear him in and to this world, using the gifts God has given us as the means to pursue that ministry. Whatever we do, we are to glorify God in doing it.

Now the phrase “glorify God” did not first emerge in the Westminster Catechism, but in Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth. Paul is reminding the Corinthians that re-

sponding to God's call is demanding and often puts us at odds with the world around us. It is not simply a matter of what is legal or acceptable in the culture, but what is good and virtuous. What will lead to healing and wholeness, our two words for the biblical word "salvation." Most of all, Paul reminds us that whatever we do, we are temples of the Holy Spirit. We are bearers of God's Spirit. We have within us the power of God to change things, to heal and make things whole, not just in our own lives, but in the world around us as well.

When Paul says, "Glorify God with your body," he is not talking about preparing yourself for next year's marathon, or going on a crash program to get in shape, though neither is necessarily excluded either. Rather, he is saying that what you and I do, day in and day out, with our bodies, is how we serve God. Discipleship is not a mind-game. It is about behavior. Christianity is not a philosophy, it is a lifestyle. It is about loving neighbors, forgiving enemies, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, relieving suffering wherever it is found, bringing healing and wholeness where there is sickness and devastation, bearing Christ to anyone who is in need.

So often, we think that our witness is too small to make a difference. But we don't have to make headlines to glorify God in our bodies. Reading to children in one of the area after school programs is glorifying God with your body.

Teaching Sunday School, or working with teenagers providing a model for how to be God's person in a world living in pretty godless ways, is glorifying God with your body.

Turning away from the racist or sexist slur in the office or at the club is glorifying God with your body.

Being here in worship on a Sunday morning rather than the hundreds of other places you could be at this very moment, is glorifying God with your body.

Serving meals to the homeless, giving a significant portion of your income to support the ministry of this congregation, helping to restore a neighbor's house, caring for a child, staying overnight at HARTS or just stopping by to talk with those who stay there, any cup of cold water offered in Jesus' name, is glorifying God with your body.

But responding to God's call involves more than simply meeting need. It has to do with making God's ways and God's will known, sharing the good news of God's power among us in Jesus Christ. That is what distinguishes God's call from all others. We see it in our gospel lesson this morning. John's witness to Jesus was such that two of his own disciples left John to follow Jesus: Andrew, and another who remains unnamed. Andrew immediately went to get his brother Simon, whose name Jesus would change to Peter, a rock upon which the church would be built. Phillip was no sooner called than he went to get Nathaniel, who himself was convinced that Jesus could not be the One because he had come from Nazareth. In response, Phillip issues the oldest evangelistic invitation in the world: "Come and see." It is that easy, "Come and see." And Nathaniel does. One after another, people were called to Jesus, who then, in turn, spent their lives bearing witness to him as the savior of the world. They didn't argue, they didn't threaten, they didn't cajole. All they did was say "Come and see."

This is God's call for each of us. Notice that not all of the disciples became apostles. Nathaniel's name does not appear in any of the lists of the twelve apostles. But he was a follower and witness, just the same. Not all of Jesus' followers became preachers, or deacons, or elders. But each took up a call to bear witness to Jesus. One was a tent maker. Even after he encountered Jesus, getting knocked off his horse as his life was changed, he remained a tent maker. He would make tents the rest of his life. But it would not keep Paul from talking about Jesus, becoming the premier theologian of the church, and the one who wrote most of the New Testament. God's call for each of them was for Jesus to be revealed.

How is Jesus being revealed in your life? It is not about going to seminary, or giving up everything to live in poverty, or going off to live as a social worker in the slums of wherever. Oh, certainly, it may mean that for some of you. If so, like Samuel, like me and so many others, it will take the confirmation of others to help you know it is God's call and not just your own desires for some meaning in your life. But each one of us has been called by God – called to reveal Jesus – that is our vocation. It is what we were ordained and equipped to in the waters of baptism. Evangelism, in word and deed, is our call, is our ministry, is our mission.

It is a witness to how far the church lost its way in the past several decades that it would call "mission" anything that helped people, but do its dead level best to avoid speaking about why we were doing what we were doing, or in whose name the good deed was being done. When we fail to speak Jesus' name in our outreach we do three things: first, we rob people in need of his power in their lives. Second, we shift the focus from him to ourselves. Third, we turn mission into agency or social work.

The century that started with the Presbyterian Church's commitment to the social gospel ended with the church just doing social work. Not only have we failed to give people the one thing that we have which can really change things for them -- Jesus Christ and his power for new life -- failing to speak his name created the notion that being Christian is nothing more than doing good deeds. We have equated being Christian with being a good citizen. As a result, most folks have decided they no longer need the church. They think they can do the deeds on their own, and will look for spirituality where people are not afraid to talk about it. The gospel has social implications to be sure. But unless we mention the one in whose name the deed is done, we deprive them of Christ's power to change their lives, and end up only doing social work.

What is it God is calling our congregation to do in the coming year? The Session will focus on helping our congregation to Reach Out, Renew, and Rejoice with the hope that we will grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. But here's the truth: it will not work unless you respond to God's call in your own life. You are the evangelists, the ones God needs to say "Come and see." That's all it takes. God has everyone's number. But we've got to answer the call. Our job is to be like Paul, people who glorify God with our bodies, people like Eli, who challenge those around us to be quiet and listen for God to speak to them, and people like Andrew and Phillip who will say, "We have found the Anointed of God." And if those around us grow reserved, as Nathanael did, simply say: "Come and see." God will take care of the rest.