

“Here I Am – Speak, Lord”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
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**1 Samuel 3: 1-10**

What does it mean to have a sense of call? Each of us probably has our own definition of being called. But my guess is that a common thread among those understandings is that when we are called, we feel led to do something by someone or some force other than ourselves. Think about it this way: when someone calls you – on the phone or in person – it is a voice you hear and then respond to. We don’t call ourselves on the phone – or at least we don’t intentionally do that! When we are called, it is from outside ourselves, and it is up to us as to how we will respond to that call.

And we can respond to that call for a variety of reasons. A friend invites you to lunch and talks about a new work venture which he is starting, then he asks if you’d be interested in joining him. A neighbor stops by your house and remarks that an elderly neighbor on your street is struggling with keeping up her house, and you both ask yourselves how you might offer your assistance. A teacher pulls you aside after class, and asks if you’ve ever considered a certain field of study and occupation, noting your enthusiasm and skills for that career.

Each of these are examples of calls that can be extended to us. And there are many more. To have a sense of call does not exclusively apply to ministry or service in the church. That’s a misconception, in my opinion. A sense of call is an invitation from God to do something – anything – for your life of faith, whether it be over a lifetime, or over an afternoon.

This story from 1 Samuel has always been seen through the lens of the call to vocation: how God calls us to a particular purpose in service as disciples. And yet, it also mirrors our constant struggle to accurately and faithfully listen and interpret God’s Word to us – either as individuals or as a community of faith. What do we need to do, as people of faith, to most clearly hear and act upon God’s call to us? How do we listen for God’s voice amid our life as the church, where we can have so many differing outlooks or opinions? What needs to take place so that our total and complete focus is, “Here I am – speak, Lord”?

The story of Samuel does not begin with his calling, of course. In the first chapter of the book, we read of his mother’s, Hannah’s, prayer to the Lord for a child, as she had been barren. Through Eli, the Lord speaks to Hannah and answers her prayer, and she dedicates her son to God under the supervision of Eli. The boy grows up into a young man, learning the ways of the Torah and becoming Eli’s apprentice at the

temple in Shiloh. Yet Eli's sons are not at all upstanding, and commit desecration to the Lord through their sinful acts at the temple. Therefore, God has decided that a change must take place: Eli and his household will die, and Samuel will replace Eli as the Lord's chosen prophet.

Perhaps the most important element to understanding this passage is found in the very first verse, where we read: "Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." By prefacing the story with this brief sentence, we are tipped to the fact that what is about to happen is extraordinary. In other words, for the hearers in those days, and for us today, God is saying: this is important, pay attention.

Did you notice the time and the setting of this interaction between Eli, Samuel, and God? It takes place at night, in the dark, where seeing is made difficult, whether you are old or young. It is dim in the temple - we read, "the lamp of God had not yet gone out" (3:3) - so for Samuel, the ensuing interactions with Eli and God take place in diminished light, making it hard to see. For Eli, it doesn't matter whether it is day or night; it is always night for him, as his "eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see" (3:2). When our ability to see is hindered, we must rely upon our other senses, in this case, the sense of hearing. The location of this interaction is significant, as well. We read that Samuel "was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was" (3:3). The holiest of places was where the Ark of the Covenant was kept in the temple. This old and young servant of God are about to encounter God in a holy space, while relying on faith to hear God's voice.

The ensuing interaction between God, Samuel, and Eli is familiar to many of us. On three occasions, God calls: "Samuel! Samuel!" On the first two occasions, Samuel believes it is Eli who is calling to him; he goes to his mentor, saying, "Here I am, for you called me." After each of those first two instances, Eli tells his young servant that no, it was not him who called Samuel. It is only upon the third calling and response by Samuel that Eli's wisdom is revealed and shared with his young servant: "Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore, Eli said to Samuel, 'Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening''" (3:9).

I find it interesting that after the first two instances, we learn that Samuel "did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him" (3:7). It took the wisdom and discernment of his mentor, Eli, to recognize that in order to hear the Lord's voice clearly, Samuel needed specific direction and guidance. Only after his mentor's direction could Samuel clearly hear that it was God speaking to him, with a specific word and direction for his life.

Donna Schaper writes: *An old man and a young man collaborate to hear God's vision for a new Israel. They are unsure at first that something*

*authentic is happening. The old man knows the ways of the Lord and guides Samuel to listen in. Eli senses the possibility of forgiveness – or at least an end to his mourning – and listens up. Samuel “did not yet know the Lord” (3:7) but finds his way by a superb guide. The news is said to “tingle” in the King James Version. (In verse eleven, we read) “I am about to do something . . . that will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle” (3:11).*

*When was the last time you felt a “tingle” about the word of God to you? When was the last time you experienced hope kicking into high gear, forgiveness writ loud, pins and needles all over your body because you were so excited?*

*With its promise of “pins and needles,” this passage is a kind of spiritual acupuncture. It brings us by way of thrilling news to a time of renewal and forgiveness.*

*Often, we make decisions because we have experienced the tingle of fear. We heard the doctor say our cancer was back, or we heard the judge say the child would be convicted for using drugs or stealing computer data. We were so scared at how close we came to hitting the other car that we had to stop and rest a minute in order to experience our body’s adrenalin rush . . . We tingled in fright.*

*What this passage recommends to us is that we begin to make decisions based on the tingle of hope. Oddly, the passage assures us that what God is going to do will make both ears tingle . . . (But) let one ear tingle with fear. Fear is legitimate under most of the circumstances of most of our lives. Fear is spiritually legitimate. A lot has gone wrong. A lot of danger lurks. But listen now with the other ear. Hear what Samuel was reluctant to hear: God is going to do a new thing, which will make both of our ears tingle (Donna Schaper, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 244-246).*

As I mentioned earlier, once Samuel finally listens to what God has to say to him, on the surface it is not the best news for his mentor, Eli. In the verses that follow our passage today, God tells Samuel that he is “about to punish (Eli’s) house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them” (3:13). That could not have been an easy thing for Samuel to receive, nor then for Eli to have to hear. And yet, because Eli knew that it was God’s voice which spoke to his young servant, he received that word of judgment with faith: “Then Eli said, ‘It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him’” (3:18).

Many times, the call of God comes at the beginnings or endings of our life. In this case, God was calling Samuel during an ending in Israel’s history, so that a new beginning might occur. We can all relate to those times of transition in life, which are filled with both fear and hope. A child goes off to college, and we are anxious for her being away, but also excited for this new chapter in her and our life. A young couple learns

they will be parents for the first time, and they are thrilled for the new joy a baby will bring, but also a bit sad that their established family life will no longer be the same. A leader of an organization takes a new job, and there is both anticipation and uncertainty for what the future holds - for both the leader and the organization. Endings become new beginnings. Fear and hope are forever intertwined.

There has been much that has been difficult over the last three months, and especially the last three weeks, with my dad's illness and death. Our family has been through a very intense and emotional time, and we will continue to rely on your love and support for strength.

One thing death does is it redefines your identity. For as a major ending in life, it forms a new beginning of how you view yourself, and how others view you. Often, it is a transition that we are unprepared for, and we have to lean in and grow into it in the wake of our loved one's death.

This hit me square in the face the night before Dad's funeral. We were sitting around the dining room table, many of our out-of-town family had arrived, and we were sharing memories and good conversation. And as I looked around, I realized I was the only man. In an instant - it felt like an instant to me - I had become the patriarch of the family. The men who had been such important figures in my life - my father, Debbie's father, my uncle, David Prince - my mentors for being a husband, a father, and a minister, were gone. A true ending had taken place.

But with that ending comes a new beginning. While I don't feel nearly as prepared for this role, I know that now I need to pass along that wisdom and knowledge as a mentor to others. I know that hope lives on in the family and friends who were touched by these men and their lives of faith. I believe that every kind act and every moment of listening to others in a time of need is a way for me and others to carry on their light in a world that has much darkness.

In the midst of whatever life brings us - new beginnings, endings, transitions, joy, grief - we have to have the courage to say, "Here I am." And with that statement of faith, God will speak - and we will not be alone.

Thanks be to God. Amen.