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The Call of Samuel

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A call story...

Last week we had a “J was a goober in college” story, so let’s have another this week! When I graduated high school, I went to college to be a music education major, and I learned two very important things. The first is that you can be a drummer all through high school, and a pretty decent one at that, and never actually learn how to read music. Second, and relatedly, reading music is very important for a degree in music education. So, about halfway through my sophomore year, I was failing out of school.

Over the winter break, I volunteered with my youth group’s trip to Hidden Valley for some snowboarding, and while most of the kids were off skiing big mountains, my boss and I were learning how to snowboard on the bunny hill. Actually, we were learning how to fall down a mountain with a piece of wood strapped to our feet, but still. At one point, we were both sitting together counting all the body parts that hurt, and I said “I don’t know what I’m going to do, I’m failing out of school.”

He responded “I don’t know, J; you’re pretty good at this...” I thought, surely he doesn’t mean the snowboarding, right? He indeed clarified that he saw the way I worked with teenagers, the way I could share my faith with them in a pretty easy way, and that maybe I should consider a run at youth ministry. The rest, as they say, is history.

Sometimes, someone else has to point out what God is saying over you. Today we’re beginning a series about vocation,

wherein Laura and I will be looking at different call stories through the Bible to see what we can learn about what vocations God has for God's people. So, before we begin, a few quick words and assumptions about vocation.

Vocation

The first is to say that *vocation is not merely religious employment*. Especially because we are going to be looking at call stories from people in the Bible, some folks tend to assume that any talk about vocation means doing what we do up here, being a pastor or a youth worker or a Christian educator. But, that's not true for most folks. You'd actually have to be crazy to do this kind of work anyway!

Secondly, as Parker Palmer said it, *vocation is the work that you can't not do*. These are those things that just burn like a fire in. Your soul, when you're not living into your vocation, it feels like the whole world is messed up. For me, I can't *not* preach. Even if I was a dishwasher at a Denny's or something, I'm fairly sure I would find opportunities to open a Bible and talk about it with people. Sarah can't *not* be a librarian. Sarah actually hasn't worked in a public library since the pandemic, and yet...spend more than 5 minutes with her, and you will get the vibe right away. Librarian. Some folks can't *not* be an accountant, and while I can't understand that one personally, it leads to another assumption:

That *we need each other to have different vocations*. Paul writes about this when he talks about the different parts of the body.

I am absolutely worthless when it comes to numbers. I need people who are good at it. Some folks have the vocation of being carpenters, or health care workers, or sanitation workers. And lucky for us, God calls us all to the vocations we need from one another.

And that's the final point before we proceed: *God calls us to our vocation*. This isn't work that we've made up to do, in fact it is the work we are made for. God has uniquely built each of us for the vocations to which God is calling us. And then, when the time is right, indeed God will issue the call.

All of that leads us to the call of Samuel.

Samuel's Story

Our story begins "The word of the Lord is rare, and visions are not widespread." What an odd way to open a story about God speaking and Samuel having a vision! But, I think it's important to focus on this, because sometimes it happens! There are times in life where hearing from God is a struggle. There are times where it feels like we just lack any vision to move forward. There are times where we feel like our walk of faith more accurately resembles radio static. The seasons where the Word is rare, and visions are not widespread, these seasons come with two truths that we need to carry.

First, that it is not a sign of a failing faith. In this series, we're going to probably spend a lot of time talking about God calling people to their vocations. What I want to get absolutely clear

is that if you haven't heard from God, if the word is rare, or you don't have a vision for your life, that's not something you've done. It's not because you don't pray enough. It's not because you don't volunteer enough. It's not because you have somehow screwed up your faith walk. It's just something that happens from time to time.

In fact, I'll bet most of us in this room have been through seasons like that. Which makes this second truth all the more important to carry with us: *God continues to work even behind the scenes*. Even if we can't hear it, God is working. Even if we don't have a vision for it, God is working. God is at work in this story of Samuel, even though the word is rare and visions are lacking. In fact, God has been moving the pieces together for generations to make sure that this moment of word and vision can come together just as they're meant to.

Figuring it out.

From here, the story takes a little bit of a Monty Python spin:

You called?

No, I didn't.

You called?

No, I didn't.

You called?

No, I didn't.

Samuel is hearing something that he doesn't recognize. This is an all new experience for the boy, something he's never come across before. So, he doesn't have a category for what he's hearing. It's foreign, and it's strange.

So, he starts making assumptions. I am guessing that he knows what Eli's voice sounds like, and that he can tell that God's voice is different. Still, hearing something you don't have a category for, you try to put the experience in the next most logical category. "I hear a voice, the only people in the temple are me and Eli...ergo!" Even if this doesn't make sense, we have this tendency to do this all the time, especially when it comes to God speaking. There's no way this is God's voice, I must be hearing things. There's no way that's God's voice, it's just a radio ad. There's no way that's God's voice, I must have just had bad burritos last night. I wonder, instead, what it looks like to expand our categories, rather than making our assumptions?

With all of those assumptions that Samuel is making, he's eager to *do* something. The phrase in Hebrew "Here I am" has been a bit of a watchword for the Hebrew people. It's what Abraham says to God. It's what Moses says to God. It's what Isaiah will later say to God. During our staff Bible study this week, one of our brilliant staff pointed out that it sounds like a call to action. Kind of a "Here I am, I'm ready, put me in coach" kind of thing. It's like sometimes when we don't know what we're hearing, we just decide to start acting, and see if it

makes any more sense then. Sometimes it does, but more often than not, it just leads us to chasing our tails.

Eli, however, figures out what's going on. Right now, Eli is kind of on the outs with God. Eli's sons have been behaving very badly, and God has already warned Eli that there were going to be some consequences for their lack of justice.

In this moment, God would usually speak the priest, so it's a bit odd that God would speak to the boy Samuel. God is not speaking in this moment in predictable ways. There's a chain of command here, right? The priest hears from God, and then the priest tells the people what God said. This moment was outside the norm, which may explain why it took Eli a while to figure everything out.

Eli teaches.

When he does though, he walks through this with Samuel. He see that Samuel needs to slow down and listen. Eli moves Samuel from the phrase "Here I am, put me in coach" and gives him a new posture. "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Eli has enough wisdom to notice that Samuel, if he keeps moving, if he keeps acting, isn't going to hear from God. Samuel needs to sit back, stop doing, and start listening. Even though this works against his own self-interest, Eli teaches Samuel, down to the words he should say.

Eli helps Samuel see what God is doing in his life, even when Samuel can't. Samuel at this point doesn't know it's God

moving. But Eli does. Eli notices that God is working in Samuel's life, even when the boy can't. And even though it's going to cost Eli something, even though he knows that God is going to take the story somewhere Eli would rather it not go, he decides that it's his job to point out to Samuel what God is doing. In fact, later in the story, Eli makes Samuel tell him what God said, even knowing it's bad news for Eli, he says "Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also if you hide anything from me of all that he told you."

Not only does Eli teach Samuel how to hear God's call on his life, but he follows up. He brings a curiosity to it. He needs to know what God is doing in Samuel's life. Even if, and this will be important as we keep working through this series, what God is doing in Samuel's life is different from what we're used to.

Our vocation.

So, what can we glean from a story like this?

For starters, we can trust that God is working, even if the Word is rare, and visions are not widespread.

Earlier this year, I got a new car. And this car, it kind of freaks me out sometimes. There are things it does that normal cars do not, but here's one of the goofiest things I think: there's no start button. There's no place to put a key in and turn it. The way it works is that if I have the key on my person, and I sit down in the driver's seat, then the car is on. And this is really

trippy too, because it's also an electric car, so where as I'm used to the sound of an engine rumbling to life and the car shaking a little bit when it's turned on, this car does...nothing when it's turned on. It's just quietly ready. Especially when I first got it, I had to trust that it was ready to go.

This is sometimes what it's like when the Word is rare, and visions aren't widespread. Friends, if you are in that place right now, trust me, it might not feel like anything is happening, but God is moving in that story. God is working to get you ready for the next time God is going to speak. God is paving the road for you to walk down. God is behind the scenes, getting things ready so that we can hear the Word and see a vision.

To do that, we're going to have to go from "Here I am" to "I'm listening." There's a scene in one of the Star Wars movies where Obi Wan is training Anakin, and Anakin is always jumping into action, rather than sitting still to assess the situation. Obi Wan sarcastically says at one point: "Always on the move."

This is how I think God looks at me sometimes. When I can't hear from God, I'm always trying to do more. When I can't hear from God, I want to start to prove my worth. When I can't hear from God, I want to dive in before I've had a chance to assess the situation. "Always on the move."

Maybe, just maybe, it's time for us to move from "Here I am, put me in coach" and get to a place where we can say "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." This will involve prolonged

seasons of stillness. This will involve intentionally seeking quiet. This will involve removing the noisemakers of our lives. This will involve us opening our ears to hear from God. But, it's a good move to make.

And lastly, we need to ask others for help in hearing from God when we can't. A little while ago, I was driving myself crazy. I am a big Dave Matthews Band fan, and I knew that I had heard a song they played, but I couldn't place it. They have an extensive catalogue, which includes some songs that are unreleased, some rarity's, a bunch of covers. Somewhere along the way, I had hears a song, and I had the melody stuck in my head, but I couldn't find it in my music collection or on YouTube or anywhere else.

So a few weeks ago, a friend and I went to the Dave Matthews Band concert when they were in town, and about four songs in...they played my mystery song. I must have sounded like a lunatic, but I started asking everyone in the section around us; "DOES ANYBODY KNOW THE NAME OF THIS SONG?!" Lucky for me, a girl about three rows up knew it. It's called Break For It, and it's floating around YouTube, but they never actually recorded it. (I've listened to it a lot since, and I think it's becoming a favorite).

But sometimes, we need help in understanding what we're hearing. I needed a whole section of Dave Matthews fans to figure out that song. I needed a youth pastor on a bunny hill at Hidden Valley to hear my call. Samuel needed Eli. It is vitally important that we not place ourselves in that role unless we're

invited, but this means that it's even more important that we be willing to ask our friends all around us what they're hearing God speak over us.

Blessing.

And so friends, may you have a deep and abiding sense of God's call in your life. May you trust that even when the word is rare and visions are not widespread, God is still there with you. May you have trusted friends who can help you see what God is calling you to, even when you can't. And may you know that at the end of God's call for you is a tremendous and abiding love, giving us the courage to say together "Speak, Lord, you're servants are listening."

Amen.



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