

“Call and Recruit”
1 Samuel 3:1-18
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2nd Sunday in Epiphany

God’s answer to a time of national calamity - at a critical time when some religious and political leaders have lost their way - God’s answer is to raise up new leaders. To raise them up - children and fishermen, marginalized women and people outside of acceptable groups - to raise them up for a mission they have yet to know or understand. In fact, if they understood what this call would mean at the time when they consented to it, they never would have said yes in the first place. This is where a sermon on politics and faith has to start. Not with our existing American institutions, not with appeals to the rule of law or even constitutional obligations, but with the calling God, whose voice sets worlds into motion and calls new leaders into being.

Some might be tempted to start with Aristotle, back in the 4th century BCE. His word, “politics” comes from “polis,” the Greek word for city and Aristotle believed that the city was the primary foundational unit for human beings, not the individual, and not the family. The city or community was the place, Aristotle argued, where familial and personal aspirations were made possible, not the other way around. A root of this word shows up much later in the New Testament where Paul encourages believers to conduct their “life together” (politeuesthe) in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ (Philippians 1:27). Politics, then, is not some added activity, or distasteful arena of a government-minded class of people. Politics is about people. It is about our life together. And the church has something important to share to say about life together.

Of course, Aristotle didn’t invent the idea of people living together in community in the 4th century BCE. He just described it and made some claims about it. The Hebrew people had been telling stories about people coming together for good or for ill for a very long time. Jesus and his followers learned from those stories in Scripture that God’s initiative in the affairs of human beings nearly always started with the call; God calling new leaders into the fray which is why a sermon on politics and faith begins with God’s call.

It’s the first instinct of God whenever things start to unravel. It’s the first instinct for Jesus when he begins his ministry - call and recruit. Call and recruit. Call and recruit again. Call to Abram & Sarai, call to Moses, call to Deborah, and Rahab, and Ruth. Call to Jeremiah and Jonah and Micah and Malachi. Call to Peter, James, and John. Call the church - Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and Libya, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs - call all over

the place and wait for a response. It's a brilliant strategy. For one thing, it means God never calls anyone who doesn't listen since by definition, to be called into God's service you have to be able to hear what God is saying to you. This gives the rest of us a way to distinguish between leaders who are called by God and those who are not, simply by whether or not they listen. Listen to other people. Listen for God for direction, and truth, and guidance. And while it's true that just because someone is good at listening to other people that doesn't mean they are listening to God it's also true that if you don't listen to other people you certainly can't listen to God.

Samuel grows up under a priest who's almost forgotten how to listen. The text says the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. Maybe that's why it takes Samuel 3 times to confirm what his own intuition is telling him. Maybe that's why it takes Eli the priest 3 times to realize what is happening. Even so, Samuel hears. Even without the proper training, without the listening 101 course, Samuel hears. It's like the capacity to listen is built into us as human beings. We are designed to be listeners, to be relational, to be connected. Even when the world around us fails to sharpen that essential human gift, it is still there. And if it takes us awhile to sort out when our crazy dreams are taking us on a joy ride and when God is actually trying to tell us something, well the good news is that God doesn't give up when we don't get it the first time. Call and recruit. Call and recruit. Call and recruit again.

It's at this point in the writing of the sermon that I started making myself extremely uncomfortable. Am I really going to suggest a week and a half after a mob carrying their "Jesus Saves" banners along with confederate flags and other white nationalist props into the Capitol, some believing they were on a mission from God - am I really going to suggest that more people need to be listening for God speaking to them? Am I really going to suggest that the answer to our problems right now is to be equally as crazy as they are?

I understand why talk of God's calling and speaking makes people who love truth and science and diversity and kindness nervous, maybe even angry. Why not let go of the religious-speak altogether? Why not shelve this pre-modern talk of call and calling back in the Middle Ages section of the library where it belongs? Some days, like two Wednesdays ago, I'd really like to.

The trouble is that I've done too much listening to other people to be able to agree to that. I've heard testimony just this week from people who grew up on the white evangelical side of the faith who left the fold because they actually listened to what God was trying to say to them through the Scriptures, through their life, through the poor and marginalized and it led them here. They're like *actual* evangelicals - people who actually believe in God's good news. I've heard others who grew up in the church testify to times when they turned down the high paying job to go and heal bodies, or organize communities, or make music because they somehow knew in their bones that this is what they were created to do whether or not the world valued it. I've heard

people talk about the way a hymn guided them through the worst moments of their life and directed them into paths more joyful than they could possibly comprehend almost as if the hymn had been written to guide them on their way. Call and recruit. Call and recruit. Call and recruit again.

The problem is not God speaking. It's people not listening; people often misguided by religious leaders substituting their own ideas of what God had to say. Religious leaders supposedly speaking for God. It always surprises me when church people fall for that. Because if you read the Bible you know that Jesus reserves a lot of his anger and judgment for religious leaders. If you know the Scriptures you see that God reserves the greatest judgment in times of national failures to love the poor, and the widow and the orphan - God's reserves the greatest judgment for the religious establishment. People like me who don't do our jobs to remind you that God's Word says "do not put your trust in princes," never give your blind allegiance to any President. People like me who don't do their jobs to remind you that we never pray "God bless America," but always, "God, make us faithful in what you require of us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God." "*Humbly with God!*" People like me who forget that politics, from the church's view, is rooted in a vision of our life together, not with partisan power that serves the interests of the few. It's the religious establishment that so often fails to listen to God's Word which is the problem that gives rise to Samuel in this text. It is the prophecy that Samuel speaks - Eli's authorization is revoked. A new prophet will arise. The problem is not God speaking. It's people not listening.

And look, sometimes I wish I could turn our religious ideas into purely secular ideas without any of this notion of God speaking to people. It would be easier to explain to some of my liberal friends who are convinced that we'd be better off without religion altogether. I sing along with John Lennon's imagination like everybody else. But without people who listened intently for God, we'd have had no abolitionist movement, no Bonhoeffer resisting the Nazis, we'd likely have even fewer people hiding Jews during the Holocaust, we'd have no Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa as a model for the US and the rest of the world for what needs to happen if we ever want to live together in justice and in peace. We'd have no nonviolent armies in the South demanding the right to vote in the face of lynchings, and dogs, and billy club. Without listening intently to God, we'd have less resistance against war, no Civil Rights Movement, and no LGBTQ equality warriors authorized to say things like, my life is as sacred as yours because I am just as equally made in the image of God as anyone else. We'd have no Habitat for Humanity, a lot fewer soup kitchens, and many, many fewer disability right leaders who knew in their bones they were not less than only different while a world of institutions was still telling them the opposite. And we'd have no Mitt Romney whose politics I don't agree with but whose voice, I am quite sure is as critical as ever.

There's no way around contending with God's call which is a very good thing when institutions are on the verge of collapse, when violence is on the rise, and when people are afraid to do what is right. Because in those times, the forces of evil will twist every principle, every religious value, every idea to convince others that the evil they are committing is actually a good thing. It's how a person can call a fair election, fraudulent or white nationalists, "good people." It's how a "Blue Lives Matters" supposedly pro-police person can rationalize their way into beating up cops, dragging them through a mob, and killing one with a fire extinguisher. It's how a crowd can stomp a woman to death and blame it on the people who were trying to preserve the peace. It's how a nation can redline Black neighborhoods and then blame the poverty and destruction that follow on the culture of the people it has torn apart. We cannot always rely on principles and conscience when the world is rewriting what is good and bad to be the opposite of what is true.

Bonhoeffer learned this the hard way. Ten years after Hitler's rise to power, he wrote to his friends in 1943, just a few months before his arrest, wrestling with how Germany went so mad. I quoted this to you before, 3 years ago but we probably should be memorizing his words today. In the words of one scholar, "Bonhoeffer was reflecting on what happens to good people, what happens to the soul, the human sense of morality and responsibility, when evil has become so embedded in a political culture that it is part of the very fabric of daily life, and it become impossible even for good people to remain untouched by it." It was the failure of the "reasonable ones" that disturbed Bonhoeffer the most. "They want to do justice to all sides, only to be crushed by the colliding forces without having accomplished anything at all," he wrote. Ethical fanaticism also failed, he said. "The fanatic believes that he can meet the power of evil with the purity of a principle. But like the bull in the arena, he attacks the red cape rather than the person carrying it, grows tired, and suffers defeat." The person of conscience also fails. "The seductive disguises by which evil approaches him make his conscience fearful and unsure until he finally settles for a salvaged conscience instead of a good conscience, that is, he deceives his own conscience in order not to despair." Duty fails, and even the person of freedom fails, he wrote. This person, he said, "values the necessary action more highly than an untarnished conscience and reputation. . . [This person] will condone the bad in order to prevent the worse and in so doing no longer discern that the very thing that he seeks to avoid as worse, might be better."

"Who stands firm?" Bonhoeffer asked himself. "Only the one whose ultimate standard is not his reason, his principles, conscience, freedom, or virtue; only the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when, in faith and in relationship to God alone, he is called to obedient and responsible action. Such a person is the responsible one, whose life is to be nothing but a response to God's question and call."¹

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "After Ten Years," Victoria J. Barnett, editor and translator, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 2017.

Only the person who listens to what God is saying.

There's no way around it, church. And I know that is terribly frustrating to hear even and especially from one of your pastors. How many times have you come to me asking for my thoughts on a difficult life decision hoping for clarity only to learn that my answer is to pray and listen more deeply. How many of you have emailed me to ask after racial justice training, okay, so what do we do now only for me to say, I don't really know. Pray and talk to others. We've been drenched in white supremacy for 400 years. If I knew how to dismantle it tomorrow, I'd be the first to tell you. How many times have you asked me what I think about God in this or that only for me to turn it back around and ask you more questions about how God might be trying to reach you, to reach us, to guide you, to guide us?

There is no getting around the real work of our life together - our politeuesthe - the real work which is simply learning to listen and not for the sappy, sentimental reasons that we often think of when we're told we should be "good listeners." I mean, look, I like the sappy sentimental stuff of being a good listener. It gives me warm fuzzies when someone tells me I'm a good listener and I hope it makes you feel good, too. But here's the honest, self-interested truth. I've learned to listen to people and their stories not out of some altruistic duty to be kind, but because that's where I find out what God is up to. That's where I find out where God is moving. That's where I find hope. That's where I find my assignment and the comfort of knowing that whatever the decision, whatever the call, whatever the challenge I am never alone in it.

We've got an inauguration this week. I know we are all on edge. Believe me, I'm on edge. The UCC has warned liberal clergy that they are possible targets. Our friends in Washington that we worshiped with not too long ago have been briefed by the FBI. I do not know what to prepare for. I don't know whether we'll be called into the streets again as some of us felt called to do over the summer. But here's what I do know. No matter how bad things get, no matter what wars are launched by the power hungry hearts of human beings, no matter how many Pharaoh's and Caesars do their dirty work, no matter how many empires rise and fall, no matter how many leaders are crucified on a hill or a motel balcony on a Friday there is always another child waking up to the whispers of a calling God reshaping their life and the world with it. Calling and recruiting, calling and recruiting. Calling and recruiting again.