

Text: I Samuel 3: 1-18  
Title: A Persistent God  
Date: 10.15.17  
Roger Allen Nelson

Archimedes was a Greek philosopher, mathematician, and engineer who lived about 200 years before Christ. In demonstrating the principle of a lever and fulcrum Archimedes is to have said, "Give me a place to stand and I shall move the earth."

That's an apt metaphor for life.

Everyone is looking for a place to stand and a way to make a difference in this world.

Everyone wants to feel like their life counts for something.

Everyone is looking for a place.

Everyone is looking for a purpose.

To quote Rick Warren in the wildly successful, "Purpose Driven Life."

*Without a purpose life is motion without meaning, activity without direction, and events without reason. Without purpose life is trivial, petty, and pointless.*

So, where do you find yourself this morning?

Where do you stand?

Where is your place?

What is your purpose?

I think those sorts of questions are part of what makes this text so engaging. How is it that the God of the universe would break in and speak to a young man? In a time when the "word of the Lord was rare, (and) there were not many visions" what can we learn from God calling Samuel? Is there something here that helps us find a place to stand and a way to move the earth?

Let's put this text in context...

God calls out and cuts a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. God leads them out of captivity in Egypt, gives them his will for liberated living, and settles them in a promised land.

But life in that land devolves into conflict and chaos. With divided hearts the children of

Abraham follow the ways of other gods and other peoples.

They forget the liberation and leading of the Lord.

They neglect their calling to be a blessing to others.

They ignore the covenant.

Their leaders prove to be corrupt, brutal, and ineffectual.

And the book of Judges closes with these lines, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."

In the midst of that quagmire there was a "barren" woman named Hannah who stood outside the temple and wept that God might give her a child. The priest, Eli, overheard her and thought she was drunk. Hannah replied that it was not drink, but the breaking of her heart and the pouring out of her soul. Eli sends her on her way with a blessing and a prayer.

Hannah returns home to her husband and in due time a son is born. She names him Samuel, which in Hebrew means either “name of God” or “heard by God,” and she sings of a great reversal where God lifts up the lowly, breaks the proud, feeds the hungry, and brings life out of death. Then in gratitude Hannah dedicates Samuel to the service of God with Eli the priest.

But, Eli is a weak and ineffectual priest whose sons are scoundrels ~ abusing their role at the temple for personal gain. Eli can’t seem to rein in his boys, so God gets fed up and takes matters into his own hands.

God intervenes and calls one with no pedigree, no power, and no place.

God breaks in and calls a boy.

God calls Samuel to move the earth.

And, dear friends, here’s another glimpse into the nature of God.

The story of scripture is of God pursuing a people, to be blessing to all people, that the world might know *shalom*. Therefore, over and over again, God breaks in to call particular people to that purpose. Eugene Peterson puts it this way:

*That God speaks is the basic reality of biblical faith. The fundamental conviction of our faith is not so much that God is, as God speaks. The biblical revelation begins with God creating by word... it concludes with Jesus, the Word of God, speaking an invitation, “Come...” All the pages in between are packed with sentences that God speaks... The conspicuous feature in all this speaking is that God speaks in personal address. God does not speak grand general truths, huge billboard declarations of truth and morals; the Lord’s speaking is to persons, named persons: Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Paul. And Samuel.*

Now. Stories like this stoke the idea that God speaks to each of us ~ that God knows each of us by name and calls us to a unique purpose. And, I’m not disputing that reality. That’s the story of scripture. But I guess the question is....

Is that a rightful expectation?

Should we listen for God to call us?

Should we expect God to lead us toward a particular place and purpose?

Is the Inscrutable God, the In-breaking God, and the Immanent God, also a Calling God?

Many of you can tell stories of hearing God call you toward a career as a teacher, musician, electrician, or counselor. Many of you can tell of God leading you to life with your spouse or finding a sense of place in this world. And, while you may not have heard God audibly speak your name, and while you didn’t repeatedly get out of bed to determine who was saying what, you have some confidence that God called you personally and particularly....

Frederick Buechner in considering vocation writes that, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

And that is a wonderful notion.

Some experience that reality. Thanks be to God.

But. But, I know all sorts of folks who spend their lives grinding out work and doing their best to raise their families and there is little meeting of deep gladness and deep hunger. Are we to imagine that God had something different in mind and that they missed their call in the night? I know all sorts of folks who are working jobs and tending after loved ones while they dream of and feel called to something else. Are they living outside of God's call?

I would caution reading too much into these "calling" narratives in scripture. In believing that God has a particular place and a particular purpose for each of us, we run the risk of missing the broader call to daily obedience and faithful attention to all the other ways that God calls to us in this world. Limiting the call of God to vocation or some other particular intersection seems something of a privilege.

Maybe there is something more here....

Samuel is lying down in the temple ~ probably tending after an oil lamp ~ when God calls. I like to imagine that the voice of God would be unmistakable and self-authenticating, but Samuel thinks God's voice to be Eli's.

And yet, neither does it dawn on Eli that the voice is God's. If the role of a priest is to mediate between God and people, Eli seems a little slow on the uptake.

But, God is persistent.

Again, and again in scripture people push back, run away from, don't recognize, make up excuses, laugh at, and generally don't jump at the call of God. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Jeremiah, Jonah, Paul, and host of others are all tracked down by God despite their objections and general human cussedness....

And even here there is another, albeit small, glimpse into the relentless-persistent-pursuit of God to love and claim people.

When Samuel finally recognizes the call as God's, his response is tender and openhearted.

*Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.*

When I was a young man I had no idea where I could stand to move the earth. Without direction, or purpose, or any sense of place, I floundered around all full of adolescent-angst-anger-and-anxiety.

My father was a college professor who was always reading. There didn't seem to be any boundaries to his curiosity as he sought God's voice in this world. When I was in high school he was reading Thomas Merton, a modern Trappist monk. I begin poking around in my dad's Merton books and he pointed me toward a prayer by Merton that proved to be the most important and consistent prayer in my life. It goes like this:

*My Lord God,  
I have no idea where I am going.  
I do not see the road ahead of me.  
I cannot know for certain where it will end.*

*Nor do I really know myself,  
and the fact that I think I am following your will  
does not mean that I am actually doing so.  
But I believe that the desire to please you  
does in fact please you.  
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.  
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.  
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,  
though I may know nothing about it.  
Therefore will I trust you always though  
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.  
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,  
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

Dear friends, I don't know much of the contours of how God would call each of us to a particular place and purpose. There is more mystery here than I can manage. But...

I do believe that God breaks in and calls out to us in all sorts of ways.

I do believe that God is persistent, unyielding and will finally get his way in this world.

I do believe that we are at our best when we can respond with Samuel or Merton. "Speak Lord, your servant is listening."

I do believe that God answers that prayer and leads us to places where we can live into the will of God ~ to love neighbor, to love enemy.

I do believe that God calls us to embody his purpose wherever we are ~ to do justice, to act with mercy, to walk humbly with God.

And sometimes that seems like enough.

May we have the grace and courage of old Eli who said, "It is the Lord. Let God do what seems good to God."

One last thing.

This story is an important link in the unfolding story of scripture because Samuel grows up to be the priest who anoints Saul as King of Israel. Samuel serves as a bridge between an old order and a new order. Samuel's call is a signal that God is doing something new.

From the broken heart of a barren woman,  
to the blessing of God,  
to the birth of a son,  
to a call in the night,  
to the anointing of a king,  
to the line of David,  
to the birth of a Messiah,  
to me and you...

The way and will of God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.