

2nd Sunday after Epiphany B 14 January 2024

1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.' Let's pray: ...

In a time when the cost of living is high and many people struggle to make ends meet, matters of job and career come into sharper focus. Even when the economy is less troubled, we preoccupy ourselves with these things and we have a general understanding of the difference between the two.

But these two realities don't paint a complete picture. A third, and poorly understood element is missing. We may have a job, or even a career, or we may not. But we always have the third reality, which is a calling.

A job or a career can be very individualistic, while a calling by nature links what we do to a larger community and contributes to the common good. A calling links us to the public world.

Another way to look at it is that someone would still follow a calling even if they had no need for the money or position that accompanies it. People follow a calling because they believe it's right for them to do so. The work may be hard and not particularly successful, but rich in meaning and significance.

A calling is directly related to making God's reign real in the realm of work. It involves being aware that we don't exist as individuals; rather, as communities of people who need and rely on each other. Our real reward is our sense of contribution to the common good.

- A calling exists even when you don't have a job, a career, or you've retired.
- A calling exists even when it seems less a career or a job than the taking up of a particular cross.
- A calling exists because someone calls you, and keeps calling you, so that the phone in your heart rings off the hook.

Ultimately, it's God who calls each one of us by name. The One who created us and sustains us, also summons us to join in concert with the rest of creation to live a fuller and more authentic life.

That's all well and good and true. But there're many people for whom the notion of calling is completely off the radar. Their work experience is unhappy, and though they may make a living, it drains them of their life. Or if they've known success and satisfaction, they still lack the language to describe what their calling is.

I believe, however, that God keeps knocking on their door, ringing the phone in their heart, asking them to do what they do as partners with him in rehabilitating creation so that it more closely resembles his divine intention.

Indeed, there is something about a calling that almost guarantees we will find it hard to recognise. God is mysterious. The divine voice speaks with power, but is often discerned as a still small voice. It comes unexpectedly and usually takes us by surprise (see 1 Kings 19:11,12 [NKJV] God's revelation to Elijah).

Consider what happens to Samuel. He's a boy who lives and works in the temple during a period when the religion of Israel has run out of puff. One night God calls to Samuel by name. Samuel thinks it's the old priest, Eli. Eli hasn't summoned him and orders Samuel to lay down.

Eventually, Eli deduces that God, who hasn't spoken much to his people lately, is calling Samuel. Eli still has enough faith to tell Samuel to listen and obey when the voice speaks again. Samuel heeds the voice, and grows up to become a pivotal figure in the tumultuous history of Israel. (Samuel was Israel's first prophet [1 Samuel 3:20; Acts 3:24; Acts 13:20] and last judge [1 Samuel 7:6,15-17]).

Or consider Nathanael. One day Philip shows up, unable to contain his excitement, and exclaims that he's just met the One long promised in the law and the prophets – Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth. Nathanael, unable to restrain his sarcasm responds with, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" as though to say, "Surely the Messiah would choose somewhere classier to appear."

However, Nathanael's own encounter with Jesus sends his mind reeling. Nathanael must have had some sense of Jesus visiting him before. When Jesus mentions the incident beneath the fig tree, Nathanael immediately blurts out, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus invites Nathanael to follow him, and that's precisely what he does.

I'm sure that both Nathanael and Samuel were startled; at the very least, surprised. And not without significant challenges, they recognise their callings. One's a boy and the other's a smart aleck. Yet, God's purpose for their lives comes to light. This gives us great hope too.

We too can renew the process of discerning our calling. We can continue to look forward with hope, and to the extent that it's possible, prepare to be surprised. The reason I say this is because God has better things in mind for us than we ever try to imagine; better things than our society, our family, or we, say to ourselves.

I hope you were listening carefully. I didn't say things more profitable or glamorous or respectable. I said "better" things. There's always a place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. God wants each of us to follow him there, so he calls each of us by name.

Maybe you know people who are aware of that place. Maybe you're such a person yourself. The job may not pay well, and the career is nothing to write home about. But God keeps you there where you do something significant to meet the world's hunger, and experience a gladness deeper than you think you deserve. You realise you're not just earning a wage or developing a resumé, you're answering a call. Rather than shrinking you, it stretches you.

One person who came to mind as I considered an illustrative example is my dear friend and colleague, Pastor Lhatru Wangchuk, the only Lutheran pastor in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. Lhatru was orphaned at the age of seven and led a hard life. To this day, the sound of a chiming clock distresses him as he recounts how he used to be summoned by a ringing bell and if he was too slow to respond, he would be beaten. Today, he is both a courageous and hard-working theologian and scholar who works diligently to translate the scriptures faithfully to help his fellow countryfolk to make the cultural leap from a syncretistic accommodation of God to faith in the one, true, triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Lhatru is bold and innovative in a country where it's forbidden to attempt to convert people from Buddhism. Lhatru's evangelistic ardour and love for his Himalayan brothers and sisters is such that even being beaten and imprisoned for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ isn't enough to deter him.

Many would run away, but Lhatru can't stop listening, and God doesn't stop calling, and the surprises keep coming. As a younger man, Lhatru followed the path of becoming a Buddhist monk; certainly, a more comfortable existence than his current one. Then one night as he was sleeping, Jesus called Lhatru in a dream to abandon his life and follow him. Lhatru obeyed and found that his life became much harder and he suffered unbearable persecution. He even tried to give up following Jesus and became mysteriously paralysed until he gave in and conceded defeat (think of Jacob wrestling God at the Jabbok [Genesis 32:22-32]). Through deep commitment, ingenuity, and gutsy perseverance, Lhatru has gained two Master degrees in theology and mission, been ordained as a Lutheran pastor, established the Bhutan Lutheran Church, taught and baptised many people, and is currently translating the Bible into a local dialect. He will tell you that his life today is difficult, but better. Deep hunger for the way, the truth, and the life [Jesus] and deep gladness, continue to meet repeatedly through the years of Lhatru's life (see Philippians 1:21-25).

We have many inspiring examples to learn from. We can profit from the stories of Samuel and Nathanael and Lhatru. We can be inspired by the stories of those who led people to greater freedom and justice like, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, and Emmeline Pankhurst's involvement in women's suffrage. We do well to take courage from how they responded to God's voice speaking to each of them.

Finally, we must hear and heed our own call. Each of us can listen intently, for God speaks to us too, perhaps through a still, small voice; perhaps through the turmoil of daily events. However God chooses to speak to us, to hear our call is always an instance of grace, always God's good plan for the world, and always better for us than we will ever dream or hope for. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.