

Being Called

Second Sunday after Epiphany - Year B - 01/17/2021

Psalm Reading: 139:1-6, 13-18

1st Reading: John 1:43-51, 2nd: 1 Sam 3:1-10

So at a tender age a young boy is given over to be raised by the priest at Shiloh. The boy is named Samuel, and we may imagine him to be earnest and obedient, as all young boys are. Well, not all young boys. I can remember what I was like at six. I was earnest and obedient for the most part, but like most boys that age I would get away with what I could get away with.

At this point in my life, my father was in the Air Force, stationed in Newfoundland, Canada. The air base was closing. He and we were headed for the center of the Air Force World, Offutt Air Force Base near Omaha, Nebraska. We were staying in a suite of rooms in the BOQ (Base Officer's Quarters). One night, as every night, we four kids were trundled off to bed, while my parents stayed up and watched television in the connecting room.

Of course, I wasn't tired. I was lying on a cot, staring at the ceiling, and listening to the sound of voices on the TV. They were garbled voices, but I knew they were calling me to some purpose, I also felt a bit of a gnawing in my stomach, and I realized that I needed to get up. There was a bathroom between the two rooms and I crawled out of the cot, I am sure I disturbed the other children, but I got up anyway and went into the bathroom, clicked on the light and ran some water into a glass. I could hear my mother's voice ask. "What are you doing up?"

Of course, I answered, “Just getting a glass of water.” My father said, “Well, drink your water, son, and then climb back into bed.”

Well, I was not tired at all, so I ran the water for some minutes until it was good and cold. There was no ice, you see. Then I clanked the glass about a bit and took my time drinking the full glass of water, as I stood in the doorway to the room where my parents were, and I watched the TV for several minutes before I was noticed. (There must have been a commercial.)

It was then I heard my father’s voice, “Drink down the rest of that water and hop into the sack.” Well, I became earnest and obedient and did as I was told.

Back in bed I tossed and turned, and tossed and turned some more. Until I hear another urgent call, this time it was not from my stomach, but it was from my bladder. So I slid off the cot as quietly as I could and went into the bathroom. The next duty I had to perform was of a private nature so involved some closing of doors and the turning on of a light. And after that job was done I was back in the doorway watching the television, perhaps it was “Dragnet”, the gritty tone of Sergeant Friday was an irresistible draw. Again, I was noticed, and again sent back to the cot.

But as I lay there, toes and nose, pointed at the ceiling, with the military blanket barely covering me to the shoulders, I thought, “I’m hungry.” It seemed like a true calling at the moment, I knew what it was that I wanted and needed. It was an open-faced honey-butter sandwich.

Honey-butter was a concoction my mom had made up that involved mixing honey and margarine into a creamy concoction that could be evenly spread over a nice piece of Wonder Bread. I knew there was some honey-butter in the next room, and well, it was calling me. I knew I was pushing my luck getting up a third time, because there was no way I would be allowed to make my own sticky honey-butter sandwich, but I figured it was worth a try to boldly ask for that open-faced sandwich.

Now, in our reading there was another little boy, perhaps more earnest and obedient than I was, lying on a cot, or maybe on the floor in the middle of the night in the temple at Shiloh. We know this because in our reading we are told that the “Lamp of God had not yet gone out.” In those days the a lamp was kept burning all night and would be doused in the morning.¹

The boy’s name was Samuel. He too heard a voice calling, but it wasn’t for a drink or to go to the bathroom, or even for a honey-butter sandwich. It was calling him to a purpose. He arose two times and went and awoke the priest of the temple. We might imagine Eli, the priest, as a patient old man. Every time he was awakened he told the boy it was not him who had called. And the boy, no doubt wondering at the circumstance, went back to his cot.

The boy came back for a third time, but now the boy had awakened a realization in Eli, that the persistent boy was being called by a higher power. And the next time that Samuel came to him, he directed him and told him what to do the next time he was called. He told him to respond to God in this way, “Go

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and lie down and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" (v.9 NIV) And the Lord did come again, and Samuel responded as he had been told to do and then the Lord spoke to Samuel. (v.11)

This little story near the beginning of the book of Samuel is thought to be a very instructive piece about God's calling. First, I think it tells us that God does, indeed, call us. God has a mission for each and every one of us suited to our abilities. And God is coming to us and telling us what this call is. We might hear the call while we are watching the television, reading a book, working a job, or perhaps, lying in bed staring at the ceiling wondering where life is taking us. And this call is not restricted to young people who have not yet found direction. God speaks to us at every age, in our twenties, thirties, eighties, nineties. Because you know in your heart of hearts that we are all, deep down inside still the inexperienced child we were at six or seven. We still have much to learn especially in the ways of God.

The next thing we can learn from this story is that we do not always recognize the voice of God the first time we hear it. In fact, some of us never truly recognize it, because it is not always plain or obvious, or we have not been taught to recognize it. I think, like the priest Eli, this is one of the functions of the church, it is one reason we listen to and read the Word. It informs us of just what our mission in the world happens to be. How to know when God is speaking to us.

You know, there is a certain niggling feeling we get in the back of our minds that prompts us to act in a certain way. Some might call it conscience, but it can be greater than that. We can

experience it as an overwhelming sense of certainty, or as a thrill going up and down our spine. We can sense God through prayer.

Eli also told Samuel how to respond, and the church can provide guidance in the this way, often providing avenues to channel that response, from helping in worship, to serving on committees that deal with missions, doing fellowship, participating in Bible study, to simply providing financial help to the church and to others in the church or in the community. I think God calls us to be in church, in worship, and through this activity we can feel that call when we expose ourselves to opportunities that present themselves. It is like the response that Samuel gives at Eli's direction. "Speak, for your servant is listening." Church is a place where we listen for God's Word to us, in faith and in action.

There is another element of the story that I relate to personally, and that is the persistence of God's calling in spite of our not understanding that call, in spite of our resistance even.

You know, when I got up that night in Newfoundland Canada for the third time, hearing the call of the honey-butter sandwich, I approached the room where my parents were with a degree of trepidation. I knew that I was about to ask for more than I deserved, more than I could reasonably hope for, but certainly too, something that was possible. I stood in the doorway between the bathroom and my parent's side of the suite catching a bit of "Dragnet" until my presence was noted. When my mother saw me, she could not have been more than

twenty-six at the time, she got to her feet and came to me. “What is it?” she asked.

Well, I had to respond, “Can I have a honey-butter sandwich?” Unbeknownst to me, standing behind me were my younger siblings in their P.J.s. My Mom called me over next to a bureau where there were a few assorted foods, most notably Wonder Bread and honey-butter. She took one slice and spread that golden, delicious mixture on the bread. She then cut it into quarters with two cuts of the butter knife. “Now, bring those over to Lenny, Michy, and Chrissy.”

I did as I was told, and we four shared in that heavenly concoction while my mom looked on. It was then off to bed for the night.

You know God is patient, as my mother was patient with me and my siblings. God was patient with Samuel in the temple where the Ark of the Covenant rested. He had called Samuel four times. It took that long, with the guidance of Eli, before he knew how to respond. And the gifts that God bestowed on Samuel were amazing, giving him power and energy and wisdom, all of which he shared with the people of Israel.

When God calls us we are given power and resources which we can share with others. But we are also given the gift of God’s grace which is sweeter even than a honey-butter sandwich if we are bold enough to ask for it. For it is through the Grace of God that we are ultimately saved through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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