

“Here I Am!”

Ps. 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Samuel 3:1-10

Today’s story from 1st Samuel is one of the better known ones in the Old Testament. It is, of course, about the experience of a young boy named Samuel, who is under the tutelage of an aging priest named Eli. And how he confuses the calling of a voice in the middle of the night to be his old mentor, while it is in truth the voice of God. Regardless of the identity of that speaker, Samuel **responds**... declaring in word and action, ‘I hear you calling me... and here I am!’

As I pondered just how this young man listened to the voice of another, that first phrase rung in my head: **‘I hear you calling.’** I was curious to see if there were any meaningful compositions relating to this declaration. And indeed, I found a number of songs with this title: “I Hear You Calling.” Most by artists that I had never heard of: One by a group named “**GOB.**” NO, not ‘GOD.’ G-O-**B.** Another by a female singer named “D J Licious.” No, I’m not making this up! And another by a rapper named ‘R Kelly.’ But then I came across one that really spoke to me. It was written in England back in 1908 by a man named Harold Lake. **“I Hear You Calling Me.”** And while it was written about a relationship with a young lady, the first verse did catch my attention with regards to today’s reading:

*“I hear you calling me. You called me when the moon had veiled her light.
Before I went from you into the night...”*

Hmmm... sound like something that could have been attributed to Eli’s young protégé, Samuel? About hearing a call during the night? And so, I read on a little further:

*“I hear you calling me. And oh, the ringing gladness of your voice!
The words that made my longing heart rejoice.”*

Thought written in a time and place far removed from that of Samuel, these words could yet describe what he experienced... a voice that called his name with a ‘ringing gladness’. Words that made his young, and longing, heart rejoice...

And in the same way that a seemingly unrelated, obscure secular song from a hundred years ago can yet be relevant to an ancient experience *thousands* of years earlier, SO TOO can those 'ancient words' of God to Samuel relate to US as well TODAY. Both through the experiences of Samuel and Eli with the living God THEN... and through our own experiences NOW... may we consider just how we too are being called to cry out, with a longing and rejoicing heart, **"Here I Am!"**

First, as we consider some of the comments made about the culture of the times that Eli and Samuel were in, we might say that there are some similarities with our own culture today. In the first verse of the passage, it says that **"the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."** (1 Sam. 3:1) Many had drifted away from the faith, not listening for or speaking **"the word of the Lord"** as they once had. The type of close relationship with God that would lead the people to have **"visions"** of His presence and purposes were limited... **"not widespread."** How often will anyone YOU know speak of a 'vision' from God? The most 'vision' WE talk about is our failing *eyesight*! Consider all of the communications you are exposed to in a given day... with friends and co-workers, or people out in the community, or in any of the various sources of electronic media. Would you say that **"the word of the Lord"** is **"rare?"** It is NOT only people in Samuel and Eli's times that are 'drifting away from the faith'... we too might say, 'Here I am'...

And in speaking of 'failing eyesight,' that brings us to consider how we might also see ourselves in the person of **Eli**. This long-time servant of God was obviously feeling the ravages of 'A-G-E'... one whose **"eyesight had begun to grow so dim that he could not see..."** But then goes on to say that **"the lamp of God had not yet gone out."** (1 Samuel 3:2-3) Now, this 'lamp of God' can be seen as referring to a physical 'lamp' that would illuminate the sacred temple where the **"ark of God"** was located. The 'ark' representing, in a tangible way, the very presence of Almighty God. But that 'lamp of God' could also be interpreted as the 'light' of God's Spirit that still burned inside of the aging priest. That just as a physical lampstand illumined a space associated with intimate presence of God, so too was there a spiritual 'lamp' that indicated the intimate presence of God within Eli... in whom **'the lamp of God had not yet gone out.'**

What bears witness to the flame of the Holy Spirit still burning in Eli is the manner in which he cared for Samuel. Taking this young boy under his wing, training him up in righteousness, in wisdom, in service. For it says that ***“Samuel did not yet know the Lord... and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.”*** (1 Samuel 3:7) And that even though he was so young... probably around 12 years old... Eli did not discount the possibility that when the boy heard this voice calling him in the night, it just might be the voice of God. Eli was not bothered by the notion that one of those ‘rare visions’ would appear not to the ‘veteran player for God,’ but to a mere ‘rookie.’ One who didn’t yet know ‘the playbook.’ Indeed, Eli realized that the future of the ‘team’ lay in the hands of an inexperienced, but capable, young person. One who had both physical strength and spiritual perception. One whom he could help to better know the Lord, and reveal His word, and ‘raise up in the ways he should go.’

Which should serve as a reminder to us of the importance of, to continue that sports analogy, “player development.” How are we passing along a Godly legacy of leadership in those who are coming behind us? What are we doing to help others ‘know the Lord,’ AND His ‘Word?’ Sure, we may not have all of the physical abilities we once had, but as long as the Spirit of the Lord burns within us, we are still called to pass that spark along. As long as our good Lord gives us breath, we can be living testimonies that ***“the lamp of God has not yet gone out.”*** By living every day to serve the true ‘Light of the World,’ we say to God, “Here I am!”

Of course, the ultimate example of being ‘available’ to God... the one who, both in word and deed, declared ***“I hear you calling me”***... is that young boy named Samuel. That ‘10-something’ who at such an early age experienced what many would wait a lifetime and never experience: hearing the audible voice of God. And not only that, but to engage in a ‘conversation’ with the Almighty. To be given the opportunity to say to the God of all creation, ***“Speak, for your servant is listening.”***

But what I find most remarkable is the manner in which that ‘servant LISTENED’ long before he really knew just WHOM he was being addressed by. He first submitted himself to the mentorship of this old priest, making a sacrifice that most **adults** would have had difficulty in doing, let alone a 12 year old. He would spend evenings in a dimly lit sanctuary in the presence of this intimidating holy artifact for which men had lost their lives simply by *touching it!* And

then, when he believed that that aging, vision-impaired priest called him in the middle of the night... not once, not twice, but *three* times... he GOT UP and ANSWERED THE CALL. And on that 'charming' third time, Samuel would then find that what he thought to be the call of a MAN was in truth GOD. ** Samuel would come to know that sometimes in answering what one believes to be a call from a PERSON we know quite well, who is 'just like us' is, **in reality**, from the GOD who is most UN-like us, whom we don't know as well as we should... but knows us VERY well..

To bring Samuel's example a little closer to home, consider my brother John Hood. If you were to ask him how he came to be 'called' to serve as an Elder for the next few years, he would likely say, 'Well, my tricky cousin Dorothy *called* me.' And he would be partially right. She did make the PHONE call. But it was GOD who truly 'CALLED' John to serve. He simply used 'Aunt Dorothy' as His 'mouthpiece.' John said to HER, 'I hear you calling.' But he said to GOD, 'Here I am!' For it's not merely 'hearing' God's call... through others... but **responding**. Saying to God... sometimes, through others... '**Here I am!**'

And so, for this new year of 2018... which should prove to be, moreso than any of these last few years, TRULY our most pivotal one as a congregation... I would offer this challenge to you. That as opportunities to serve arise... service both within these four walls, and outside of them... don't just 'hear' the human voice speaking to you. But rather, the Divine one. The God who awaits your answer.

In the closing words of that song I quoted at the beginning of the message, the author said:

"You spoke, – do you remember? – and my heart

Still hears the distant music of your voice. I hear you calling me..."

Through the words of God's creation... both human and of nature... we can 'Hear the distant music of God's voice. Will we simply 'hear' ... or will we 'act?' For in answer to that question spoken by earthly lovers, as it applies to God, He most certainly 'remembers' His speech to us. The question is, 'will WE?'

RE-member,' all that He has done for us... and '**RE-pond**'... A response that begins with something as simple as "**Here I am...**"