

INTRODUCTION

I can't point to a moment that I would call 'conversion.' I have always been, secretly, a little jealous of people who can name that moment – the time and place, the event and the situation where they 'became' a Christian – praying the sinners' prayer, coming forward for an altar call, having that great ah-hah moment of being overwhelmed by the majesty of nature.

These are the markers that, for many in the Christian world are necessary for them to feel, and to be, fully a member of the community of believers. Me, I've grown up in the church. I was a Presbyterian before I could walk, talk, or even think – that would make it at least last Wednesday.

Being born into the church, the son of a pastor and, more importantly, of a pastor's wife; a Christian was more like something I could choose not to be, rather than a course I could choose to follow. But for all those times when I chose the downward path, I never really strayed too far from a general direction that has led me to this community of faith, this pulpit, this morning.

So when people are telling their faith stories, and recounting their moments of conversion I sit quietly and fidget. If pressed I may talk about the time – the last time – that I stopped fighting my faith. At those moments I usually leave out the fact that at that point in my life I was serving on the session of my church.

Or I may talk about the conversation where Cheryl suggested that she really didn't think I knew very much about the Bible. Incidentally, she denies that she ever said that. I on the other hand remember it very well, because I took her comment to be a challenge, and rather than admitting that she was right (and she was), I have since made it my mission to prove her wrong. I'm still trying, still learning, but I don't hold out much hope of succeeding any time soon.

So it is that I go about the business of being a Presbyterian. I serve on committees, I sing in the choir, I serve the Presbytery and the larger church, I climb ladders, I teach and I learn. All the normal stuff, just like many of you. And on most days that's all it is – serving the church, serving the people, being there.

But even being there is important.

Renita Weems is a pastor, scholar, and commentator of significant stature. One of her quotes speaks directly to my life of faith. She said; "Now, many times I have mounted a pulpit or gone into a classroom and even written books when I was enraged with God, when I hadn't heard from God, and was not even on speaking terms.

But still I mount the pulpit, because in case God wants to speak, I'll be there to listen."

LESSONS: SAMUEL

So it was for Samuel. We don't know how old Samuel was on that fateful night. As soon as he was weaned his mother took him to the temple at Shiloh to serve there under the priest Eli. It is reasonable to assume that he was still quite young – perhaps not even a teenager.

In the second chapter of First Samuel we learn of some of the deeds of Eli's sons. Those boys would certainly not be out of place in the Illinois governor's mansion, or the New York governor's mansion for that matter. Some things never change, and the corruption borne of power is a universal constant for we humans.

That their father did try to exert some control over them will be of no help in the end. The fate of Eli and his family is sealed, and it falls to young Samuel to pronounce the verdict.

That may be the first lesson we learn from this story.

When a message is to be delivered, God doesn't respect traditional lines of authority.
How do you tell your priest that you are about to blot out his heritage from the annals of history? If you're God you send whomever is handy – in this case a very frightened young apprentice.

But the second lesson is also important to remember.

God's messengers are usually successful.
They get to deliver their message, it is heard, and they most often manage to escape with their skins intact.

At this point you may be thinking that, when I do finally conclude this message, I'll suggest that we should be ready to be God's messengers, even though we might feel as inadequate as young Samuel, even though we wonder if anyone will listen, or if we'll survive the task.

Yes.

But wait, there's more.

As I read the story a second (or was it a tenth) time, I started to see other possible lessons that we can draw from this account.

Here a few:

God's call comes in the dark watches of the night.
While for Samuel it was physical night, it can also be emotional night.

When the world is bright and sunny, when we have direction and energy, when we are strutting down the street whistling a happy tune, we aren't likely to be able to hear God. I like to think that at those times God just wants to leave us alone. But I'm afraid that the truth is that in the good times we are so self-absorbed that we just aren't listening.

On the other hand it's in periods of personal turmoil, seasons of self-doubt, times when we are lost and wandering in the darkness of pain and uncertainty that we are most open to God's voice.

Listening harder? Probably.

Hoping more? Likely.

Relieved of all our false gods and everything else that gets in the way of hearing? Definitely.

Whatever the reason, it is in the dark watches of the night when we are most likely to hear God's call.

Next, God's call comes to us even if we don't think we're ready/able/good enough.

There was nothing special about Samuel – age or wisdom or position. He was just a boy, a servant, really. We have this belief that children can see things – angels and such – because of their innocence.

But I don't think that's what's going on in this story. I believe that God spoke to Samuel because Samuel could hear God's call. It's just a guess, but I'm thinking that Samuel was more able to hear because his head wasn't loaded down with plans and possibilities.

He was in the moment, that's all. Perhaps it's the same with us. Maybe we need to spend less time reliving yesterday and planning for tomorrow. Maybe we need to spend more time in the moment, just being.

Then, God's call can sound like it's from someone else, other than God.

The Biblical text makes a big deal about how Samuel was fooled – three times – by thinking that the call was coming from Eli. So it is with God's call to us. We aren't likely to hear God directly (though I wouldn't rule out the possibility). We are more likely to hear God through the voice of a friend, or a stranger.

So if we're waiting for clouds and lightning and thunder and trumpets we're likely to miss the still small voice standing next to us on the street corner, or sitting across the table from us at the coffee shop.

And finally, When God calls it's not always easy news.

Samuel sure learned that lesson. Imagine how he must have felt, delivering a death sentence to Eli. I'm guessing he probably felt like he was also delivering his own death sentence. But even though the news wasn't easy Samuel delivered it – with Eli's support and encouragement.

It was, after all, a message from God. And painful or inconvenient though it may be, when God gives us a task there's no real way to get around it.

Later in the Old Testament we find another prophet who was given a hard and distasteful message to deliver. That prophet balked at the task, and spent three days in the belly of a whale. He sang a song of repentance and was rescued (actually from Jonah 2:10: "...the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land."). From there he proceeded to deliver the message, and was surprised (though not thrilled) that the people of Ninevah took his message to heart and repented.

When God calls it's not always easy news, but it is always important news.

So...in the Samuel passage we find six lessons about God's call. We find two more lessons, and perhaps easier news in John.

LESSONS: JOHN

For instance: A call can catch us off guard.

Nathanael was lounging under a tree when he received the call. This is actually really good news. I'm going to make it a point to spend more time lounging under a tree. I wonder if I can hear God's call any better if I'm lying in a hammock?

And, The call is manifest even before we know it.

Not that you should be looking over your shoulder all the time, but be aware. Even now God might be preparing a call for you.

So there you have it; Eight lessons from these scripture passages:

- ✦ When a message is to be delivered, God doesn't respect traditional lines of authority.
- ✦ God's messengers are usually successful.
- ✦ God's call comes in the dark watches of the night.
- ✦ It comes to us even if we don't think we're ready/able/good enough.
- ✦ It can sound like it's from someone else other than God.
- ✦ When God calls it's not always easy news.
- ✦ A call can catch us off guard.
- ✦ It's manifest even before we know it.

THE QUESTION

Eight lessons and one question: How do you know it's God calling? Samuel certainly didn't know, not until Eli told him. But Nathanael did know even before he actually met Jesus. You see, Nathanael had Philip to deliver the call. He had a friend to testify to the truth of Jesus' Messiahship. "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote..." But it's not always a friend who will deliver the call.

So even for Nathanael, and certainly for us it's good to have a pretty good working knowledge of the Bible. "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote..." For we Christians it's relatively easy to determine if a call is real. If the call is something Jesus would have you do it's a good idea to listen closely.

And when you do think it's God calling, it's good to be able to check with someone else. That's where a relationship to a faith community comes in very handy. Share your thoughts with Marci. Talk about them in your Sunday School class, your women's circle, your men's breakfast, your prayer group. You're among friends and they will support you, even if they have to point out that the voice you've heard is probably your own desires rather than God's call.

On the other hand, it might just be God's voice you are hearing.

MY CALL

While I don't have a conversion story to tell, I can share the experience of being called. My own call came last June. I was preparing to preach on the 8th. The text for that week was from the 6th chapter of Matthew – and it started out with Jesus calling Matthew to follow him. As I wrote, I began to hear another voice. That voice was encouraging me to find a deeper meaning in the text.

What I discovered through that experience was a call and a claim not only for my life, but for the whole church. My call and, in the end, that sermon had to do with social justice, and the role of the church in proclaiming and ushering in God's kingdom. As I wrote, I remember thinking about the beginning of Mark's Gospel;

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Not in heaven, not at the time of the apocalypse, but right here, right now. And if it is to happen, if God's reign is to prevail here on earth it is we, the church, who will prepare the way. I've thought a lot about that call in the last seven months. I've talked with Marci and with several of you about it. I've read and researched and made connections with people in other churches who have heard that same call.

CREATION CARE

And then, last week, our Sunday evening class was studying creation, and particularly our role in the ongoing development of God's creation. If we take it all the way back to Genesis we notice some interesting, and troubling, language in Chapter 1. In verse 28 we (that is Adam and Eve) are given instructions:

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

This is the legacy that we in the Judeo-Christian lineage have taken to be our heritage. Who are we, as a church, as a community, as a species? We are the ones who have dominion. We are the ones who are charged with subduing the earth.

The problem comes when we, as a species, as a community, even as a church, re-interpret the meanings of dominion and subdue. Too often, and for much of human history we have substituted meanings of our own, so that "dominion" becomes "despoil" and "subdue" becomes "subjugate." Our thought is not for the good of the world, but for how it can serve us.

We see immense grandeur, and we think of unlimited potential. We see vast resources. And even though we know that they are not endless, we can't see that end, so we convince ourselves that what we do today will have little, if any, lasting effect.

But you see, there's a difference between "dominion" and "despoiling". There's a difference between "subduing" and "subjugation". And that difference is found in terms of responsibility and stewardship.

Despoiling and subjugation have no thought for stewardship, no thought for the future, no thought for what is good for the earth, or its inhabitants, plants or animals – humans included.

But as a church and as Christians we have all been called. Our call is to proclaim the kingdom, to usher in the kingdom, to tend the garden, here, in the midst of this city, this country. There are many facets to this call, but certainly one of the most significant is a call to environmental stewardship.

SOUTHMINSTER'S CALL

And we at Southminster have already begun. In the downstairs hallway, thanks to the Presbyterian Women, you will see recycling bins for glass and cans and plastic and paper. As you leave the sanctuary this morning you will see baskets for recycling your bulletins. The windows in the west half of the church were replaced. Thanks to a bequest from the Alice Rothemeil estate they are now state-of-the-art energy efficient windows. The front entry is designed to be more welcoming, but it's design also yields significant energy savings. We have programmable thermostats throughout the building and a new ceiling in the Genesis room that really improves its insulation.

These measures and others that I've probably missed are a good beginning. But they are only a beginning. Over the next months and years we will be asking what else we can do, and we'll come up with creative ideas for demonstrating our commitment to the benefit of God's kingdom.

We need your help. We need your ideas. We need your prayers. No one can do this alone but together we can do amazing and blessed things.

So what's next? Next is your part. Talk to me. Ask questions. Share ideas. I want to know how we as a church, and how we as individuals can become better stewards of the kingdom.

For it is a kingdom and a task that God has entrusted to our care, and we owe it, and we owe God our best efforts.

Amen.