

Are You Talking to ME?!?

I Sam. 3:1-10

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I was doing a wedding back in the fall in downtown Louisville, and to make sure I didn't get caught in rush-hour bridge traffic I arrived a couple hours early. I had some time to kill, so I made my way over to the Louisville Slugger museum. I had never been before, so I was like a kid in a baseball bat factory as I look at the displays. I moved around the room in hushed reverence as I looked at the memorabilia from some of the game's most legendary players.

And then I heard it. "Kory." "Kory." I got goosebumps! It was a real "Field of Dreams" moment. I thought to myself, "This is it! God is finally recognizing my hidden talents and encouraging me to try out for the Reds!" But when I turned around, I realized the voice was coming from a mom whose toddler son – named Kory – was waddling behind me.

Have you ever had that happen to you? Have you ever heard your name being called, only to realize it wasn't really you that was being called? Or on the flipside, have you ever NOT heard your name when it WAS being called? I can't tell you how many times I've been waiting for a table at a restaurant, and I'm so spaced out that they have to call my name three times before I realize they are talking to me.

That's what happened to Samuel in our story today. It took him three times to figure out what was going on, and even then it took a little help from Eli. The story of Samuel is an important one in Israel's history because it marks a crucial transition in leadership for God's people. Up until this time, the Israelites had been governed by a series of judges. But as the people looked around them and saw that other nations were ruled by monarchs, they decided they wanted a king, too. So Samuel will be the last of the judges and will be the one who anoints the first king, which will be Saul.

But before Samuel can follow God's lead, he first has to hear God's voice. Samuel was dedicated to God's work at an early age, after his mother Hannah promised that if God ended her barrenness and gave her a son, she would give him back to God. So as soon as he was weaned, Samuel was taken to the temple and left with Eli, the temple priest, who raised the boy to follow in his line of work.

In our passage today, Eli has grown old, weak and infirm, and the time has come for Samuel to hear the voice of the Lord, for the Lord to be revealed to him, and for him to assume his role in the priestly vocation. Except for one problem: there's a disconnect between the transmitter and the receiver. If you're trying to use a GPS around a lot of tall buildings or talk on a cell phone in the mountains, you know what I'm talking about. For communication to work, you have to have someone who's sending the message and someone on the other end who's receiving it. In the story, the message is sent by God but not received by Samuel.

Instead, Samuel thinks Eli is calling him, so we have this Laurel and Hardy routine where Samuel is called by God three times and all three times he goes to Samuel and says, "Here I am!" After the third time, Eli figures out what's going on and instructs Samuel to pay attention to the source of the signal: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

If we were to identify with one of the characters in this story, it would probably be Samuel. Rarely does God's call come to us in a crystal-clear, interference-free fashion, and even when it does, we don't always respond to it faithfully. Samuel moves from misunderstanding

("Yes, Eli?") to recognition ("Oh, that wasn't you?") to response ("Speak, Lord"). Our journeys in faith aren't marked by consistent steps forward, but are more like staggers, a step backward, two steps forward, a step off to the side. For many of us, we have to work our way through responses like "Surely God isn't talking to me" and "God would you please leave me alone!" before we can get to, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

And even when we do believe God is calling us, that doesn't mean we always understand what God is saying. I may have told you before that I had a seminary colleague who was talking in our theology class about God's call and how when God was truly calling him to do something he felt this restless movement deep down inside of him. And our crotchety theology professor peered over his glasses and said, "How do you know it's not gas?" How do we know? How do we know it's really God? Samuel didn't.

So if Samuel didn't recognize God's voice, what changed? What happened that allowed Samuel to tap into God's signal and respond? What prepared the way for one of Israel's greatest leaders to receive God's word? Was it a brilliant shaft of light and a chorus of angels? Maybe it was a thunderbolt and a divine smack on the head? No quite. It was an old, blind, wise priest saying, "You know, God might be calling your name."

Do you realize what this means for us? Here's the thing: I read this story and I identify with Samuel. Why? Because he's the young guy. He's the one with his future ahead of him, just beginning to live into this call God is placing in his hearts. But I'm afraid to admit that my statute of limitations for identifying with 10-year-old prophets is running out for me. So what if I'm not Samuel; what if I'm Eli? What if this story isn't about me hearing the call of God, but about me helping someone else hear the call of God?

This doesn't discount the fact that God can still call us, no matter what our age. Realize that God called Abraham when he was 75. Moses saw the burning bush when he was 80. We're never too old to be called by God. There is no expiration date on our ability to serve God. But I want us to consider that once we reach a certain age and level of experience in our lives, one of our primary roles is to name what we see in those who are coming after us.

That might be tough for some of us to accept. For years, this church ran on the incredible generosity of its volunteers, people who gave countless hours to the ministry and programs and leadership of this church. But there comes a time when the movers and shakers become the creakers and groaners, and it's time for someone else to step up and serve. I believe Crestwood is going through that kind of transition now. We are a church full of Elis and Samuels, and it's important for us to know our role in helping this church move forward in serving God.

When I taught public speaking at a community college in Illinois, most of my students were second-career folks who were taking classes at night after work to further their education. These weren't bold, fearless teens; these were worn-down, struggling adults. And the last thing they wanted to do after eight hours of work was stand up before a group of strangers and give a speech. As the first speaking assignment approached, they would line up at my desk or pull me off to the side and say, "I don't think I can do this. I'm too nervous. I don't know what to say. I'm not sure this is for me."

One of the joys I got from teaching was being able to look those students in the eye and say, "I see something in you. I see a wisdom. I see a quiet confidence. I see a teaching spirit. I believe you can do this." It was amazing to watch these people grow during the semester, and often times the most unsure students ended up after 16 weeks being the best speakers. I don't take any credit for that. I didn't give them something new. I simply named what I saw they already had.

Has someone in your life ever told you, “I see something in you?” Maybe a teacher or a coach or a parent or a pastor. I hope someone has said that to you. Those are life-changing words. But sometimes we don’t speak them when we should. There are some churches in our denomination that are minister-making machines. They pump out seminary students like an assembly line. Then there are other churches – long-established, healthy churches – that have only had one or two ministers come out of their congregation. And I refuse to believe there were only one or two people in that church’s entire history who had the gifts for ministry.

I think each church, Crestwood included, is brimming with potential servant leaders, people who can do amazing things in God’s name as ministers or Elders or team chairs or Sunday School teachers. But there’s one thing missing: a nudge of encouragement, a word of affirmation, someone to take interest in them and say, “I see something in you.” It’s amazing how when someone names a gift they see in us, we actually start to believe it. “I see something in you.”

We are Samuel, our name being called, responding with misunderstanding then recognition. We are Eli, called to help others hear and respond to who God is calling them to be. In both cases, may we remain open to the ways God is moving in our lives, to the places God is calling us to go, to the people God is calling us to be, even if we are called to move from being young Samuel to not-so-young Eli. And in all those situations, may we have the faith and the grace and the courage to respond, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”