

The Rev. Erin Hensley
Epiphany 2B
1 Samuel 3:1-20

Call in Community

We enter God's story with God's people in 1 Samuel during a time in which "the word of the LORD was rare" and "visions were not widespread." Eli's sons, who are priests in temple, have been abusing their power. They have taken more than their fair share of temple offerings as well as taken indecent liberties with female servers. Eli's vision, both literally and metaphorically speaking, is basically gone. Eli has done the best he can for Samuel, teaching him everything he knows about the service of the LORD. Eli has done the best he can for his biological children, but he cannot restrain his sons' bad behavior.

In the wee hours before dawn, Samuel sleeps close to the holy of holies, virtually at the foot of what we might call the altar today, and hears his name. Samuel wakes Eli and says, "Here I am." This happens two more times and the final time Eli perceives that the Lord is speaking to the boy; this teenager is not crazy. Eli wisely counsels Samuel, "It's okay. You're not dreaming. Lie down and if He calls again, say, 'speak LORD, for your servant is listening.'" Graciously, the LORD calls Samuel once more; this time Samuel knows who is calling and he says: "LORD, I am here. I am listening." The Word of the LORD is no word of comfort, but a word of prophecy about the soon to be destruction of the house of Eli. And for the next hour or so, Samuel stays awake wondering if and how he can share what he has heard with his mentor, who's like a father to him. Blessedly, at the dawning of the day, Eli, tells Samuel to not hide anything that the LORD has spoken. And young Samuel bravely speaks what he heard and Eli bravely accepts this word. In the years to come, God keeps speaking to Samuel and he keeps listening and speaking the word to all of Israel.

This story in some ways seems too far fetched for many of us. God explicitly directly talking to us in the middle of the night or really any time of day is not common. We may yearn to hear God speak, but rarely is the voice of the LORD so easy to recognize. Rarely is the word of the LORD so clear. With such experience in mind, we treat this part of God's story with God's people as just ancient history or mere fantasy.

Perhaps we have only heard the first ten verses of the story. You see, verses 11-20 are optional in the lectionary and after hearing what happens in these verses, we may not want God to speak to us at all. The thought of telling our father or mother for instance, "Oh, by the way, the leadership around here is changing. You'll be out of the house by morning" is not appealing. Why would we want the LORD of heaven and earth to call us by name if what we have to do is so risky? So we skip over this story as quickly as possible.

But we need this story to remind us that God's call and our response occurs in community. Remember that young Samuel needed Eli's help to recognize the voice calling his name as the voice of the LORD. Remember that Eli raised Samuel in the context of the family of faith in the temple. Remember that all of Samuel's time with Eli his mentor, all of the time spent in study and prayer and service, helped prepare Samuel for this moment. Samuel's word was not solely for himself; God's word through him was

to reach Eli and eventually reach throughout Israel. Eli remained open and vulnerable to that word. The serenity prayer was written thousands of years later, but all of Eli's time in the family of faith helped him have "the serenity to accept the things [he could not] change." Eli's serenity came from years upon years of seeking God with others, studying God's word, serving the Lord as best he knew how with the help of the larger faith community.

In my call to the priesthood, I certainly had no experience like Samuel's. I participated in a week long gathering of Christian college students to sing, pray, and hear speakers like Bishop Stephen Charleston and Desmond Tutu. The theme for the week was Micah 6:8 "What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." In between speakers, someone made an announcement saying that in a few years many Episcopal priests would be retiring and we needed young Episcopal priests who would try and live this verse from Micah. And in a moment, something from within my heart said, "Sign me up." I went home and told my mom that I thought I was supposed to be a priest. She didn't seem surprised and said that made sense to her. We went to eat ice cream and that was that.

In the years to come, some people asked if I had thought about ordained ministry. I lied and said "no" and there came a point where I couldn't lie anymore. Once in the official discernment process, I still wanted a neon sign. I still wanted a Samuel experience. I still wanted God to clear his throat from on high and clearly say, "Erin, you are supposed to be a priest." My mother poignantly asked me if I had heard any no's. Had anyone on the parish discernment committee, the commission on ministry, or the standing committee offered concerns about this particular vocation for me? I answered "no" and she went on to ask, "Have you ever felt pulled so strongly to any other ministry or job?" I said "no" along the way if anyone in the parish discernment committee did not sense this ministry as my particular calling and I responded no. My mom wisely responded, "Well, there's your neon sign!" The experiences within my church family, the times of great loss and celebration, the encounters with Christ in unexpected people and places, conversations with spiritual directors, this experience in community formed me to hear and respond to God calling.

Clergy or lay, ordained or not, we all have call stories (and usually more than one in our lifetime). And when God calls, God calls us in community. This is good news, great news actually, for you and for me. Since God calls in community, we are not doomed when we ourselves cannot identify God's voice. God provides the help we need. Because God calls in community we can respect and learn from other voices, no one person has a corner on the market for God. Because God calls in community we can be more comfortable with both giving and receiving help. After all, if we don't need help now we need it sometime. And you might be the very help someone needs. You might be the Eli for a Samuel. You might have the discernment one needs to gain clarity on the numerous voices that cry for our attention. You might offer support when a person of faith speaks a tough word. Or you may be the Samuel for an Eli at some point. You might have the courage to name what is broken, even to those who are closest to you.

Not having an experience like Samuel's or being afraid that God will ask us to do a hard thing doesn't get us off the hook. The living God seeks you and me by name. The hope and the gift is that together with God's help we can know His way and actually walk in that way all the days of our life. My brothers and sisters, listening to God and

responding accordingly is no mere pipe dream, but a possibility. So remain in community; especially in the confusion of dark nights, ask for help, learn from others, say the hard things, and be vulnerable. Be vulnerable. Together as a church family, not alone, we have better hearing, better speaking, and more faithful living to gain.