

# Calling the Unqualified

I Samuel 3:1-10

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Power shifts occur with regularity in life. Once again the Patriots sit atop the NFL as champions but we know that the Tom Brady /Bill Belichick dynasty cannot last forever. The list of Presidential hopefuls announcing their intention to run for office in 2020 is growing. Nicolas Maduro is holding onto power in Venezuela as the opposition leader Juan Guaido declares himself interim President, and his supporters take to the streets demanding new elections. Peggy Noonan in yesterday's *Wall Street Journal* reported, "When Jim Mattis, John Kelly, and H.R. McMaster left the (President's) administration, a cumulative 123 years of military and diplomatic experience left with them." Power shifts occur with regularity in life.

So it is no real surprise that power of leadership also shifts within the community of faith. Last fall one of the trustees of Princeton Seminary, Rev. Dr. Blair Monie, a retired pastor in Dallas Texas, finally lost his battle with pancreatic cancer. Blair was teaching at Austin Seminary on the University of Texas campus the past few years. He would interview people in ministry in front of his class to help students learn about the practicalities of ministry and help prepare them for their future roles. As his illness became more serious, Blair Monie approached Ted Wardlaw, the President of the seminary, and asked if he could lead one more class in September. Ted Wardlaw suggested that he interview Blair, this time about dying. Ted told me it was one of the most moving experiences he has ever had in the classroom.

Craig Barnes, President of Princeton Seminary, wrote an article recently in *Christian Century* about his last conversations with Blair Monie as well as with another former trustee who died in the fall, Laird Stuart. It was entitled, "Gratitude at the End." In the article Barnes writes, "As I listened to these two pastors in their last conversations together, knowing that they were dying, the most striking thing to me wasn't their fearlessness at dying. Nor was I in awe primarily of their amazingly sturdy faith — which was why they had so little fear. The thing I keep thinking about is what both of them kept talking about at the end of their lives: gratitude . . . This is what the old pastors remember, and why they are so grateful at the end of their lives. They spent

their years functioning essentially as angels who keep saying, 'Behold!' They knew the ground of the Church was holy even when it was a holy mess."

Our text today tells of a time when the people of God were in a holy mess. God initiated a power shift. Eli, the old pastor, is displaced by his younger protégé and mentee, Samuel. Samuel will provide critical leadership for the future. The roles between the two are reversed. Samuel comes to power and Eli loses power. There is a chance for newness that is deeply rooted in the faithfulness of many. Samuel's mother, Hannah, believed her son to be specially given to her and she gave him back to the Lord for his service in the community of faith. Eli has to yield his power. "Israel's daring doxology," according to Walter Brueggemann, contributes to this chance for newness, as well as Samuel's availability and God's resolve to do a new thing. In the midst of a difficult public crisis, the Lord asserts essentially, "Behold, I am doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it?"

What new thing is God doing in your life? What new thing does God want to do in our life together as a church? Jesus says, "Ask and it will be given you, search and you will find." Are you interested enough in what God may have to say to you to listen for it? We seem to be over-stimulated and under-fulfilled. Maybe there is a better way.

Samuel was a young man on a meteoric rise in matters of faith and worship. He had all the fundamentals, and was about to displace Eli as God's representative. Like many others, he started out naïve and innocent. In the story today, he kept hearing someone's voice and wrongly assumed it was Eli. Eli finally realized what was going on and instructed him to listen and next time invite God to speak.

Eli was being replaced for cause. His sons were complete jerks, religious phonies, who used their position in their father's employ for self-seeking and personal reward. The Bible calls them "... scoundrels (with) no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people." Samuel, by contrast, was pure inside and out. His mother, Hannah, had prayed for a child, and when she had Samuel, she was so grateful to the Lord that she gave him to the Temple to be raised as the servant of the Lord. While the back-story is interesting, what interests me today is that all the preparation, the belief that God can and will act, and the obedience demonstrated by Samuel and his mother Hannah, comes down to this exchange; this reversal; this replacement of Eli with Samuel.

As others have said, “God chooses the unlikely to accomplish the impossible.” Rarely does God choose based upon the same criteria that we might use. Samuel, this unlikely young man, in a time when visions were not widespread and the word of the Lord was rare, emerges from his naiveté and innocence to become a great leader. The power shift in this text is an important turning point.

Samuel himself will later choose the future king of Israel. Even his confusion is evident when he thinks the son of Jesse, who looks the part, must be the one God wants. But soon he discovers that little David, the runt of the litter, is actually the one with the most heart and courage because of his faith. Even Samuel relied too heavily upon the superficial rather than substantive considerations. Surely God led him to Jesse’s family because the tallest, eldest, strongest boy, Eliab, was to become the next leader. The ironic twist is that God chose the one son who wasn’t even there! All seven of the elder brothers were trotted out before the prophet but the one chosen by God was not among them. Little David, the youngest, was still at work shepherding his flock and was about to be anointed by Samuel as the shepherd of the people — another power shift.

One cannot judge merely by the outward appearance of things. How many coaches have underestimated their opponents by misjudging the “appearance” of the other players rather than their effectiveness as a team? How many employers have overestimated the capability of an applicant? How many brides and grooms have misjudged their future spouses by too much attention to external qualities and too little attention to inner qualities? One cannot judge merely by the outward appearance. Character matters in every way.

To avoid the much more difficult and time-consuming process of careful analysis, we all rely upon snap judgments of others and preconceived categories, even prejudices, to size up people we don’t know. Studies show (for example) that we tend to think more highly of physically attractive people than perhaps we should. Knowing that it is human to judge by the outward appearance, especially in the age of television, politicians are careful to portray themselves as vibrant, strong, with a good sense of humor, yet firm and resolute. And their make-up artists make an indelible impression. But politicians are not alone.

God spoke and kept speaking several times before finally connecting with Samuel. How many times has the Lord tried to speak with us? How often has the Lord tried to confront something in

us, tried to change our mind or direction, offered to comfort and hold us, yet we were unwilling or unable to tune in?

Maybe God is calling you to some new undertaking, to bring faith, hope, and love to someone else, to stand up for your faith in some situation, some holy mess, that keeps going from bad to worse. Or maybe the Lord is just tapping you on the shoulder and inviting you to slow down and limit the distractions that occupy you from dawn to dusk every day, inviting you to listen for a better way of living with greater sense of purpose and fulfillment. The Lord continues to call the unqualified to do the impossible. Maybe today you will find your calling at the Deacon Ministry Fair – a perfect opportunity to reach out in compassion and care for others in the church and community.

In this country, there are seismic shifts taking place today in the church. Fewer people attend church regularly. Churches are closing. No longer is Sunday morning a protected time in the week for worship. There are soccer, and hockey, and baseball games for children and their families. Church culture can sometimes feel like a holy mess. But I still believe the ground of the Church is holy, even when it is a holy mess. And I'm grateful that we get to spend our years functioning together, a little like holy angels who keep saying, "Behold! This is the word of the Lord! The kingdom of God is at hand! Repent and believe the Good News! We bring you good news of great joy for all people, a Savior has been born."

What power shift needs to happen in our midst? Who among us feels unqualified and yet God may just be calling him or her to service in the reign of our Lord? I have a suspicion that the Lord is calling us to more than mediocrity, more than standard operating procedure, more than business in the church as usual. We seem content if the bills get paid at the church and it doesn't demand too much from any of us in terms of time and effort. What if we started to use a different calculus, asking the question, What new thing is the Lord doing and how can we participate in it? What if every member and friend of the church were mobilized in ministry in some way? What if the power shift that needs to happen is for every one of us to hear the call? I know this. Everyone is gifted. Everyone has a contribution to make. Let's put some effort into changing the world here in our little part of it – for the sake of those who will follow us.

When I think back to my Sunday school experience and the confirmation class that I attended, I can tell you that no one there would have guessed that I was destined to become a pastor! You just never know what the Lord will do and who the Lord will call to serve. Though unqualified, we too are called to respond to God with faith and faithfulness even when called upon to do the impossible.

We might begin simply like Samuel replying, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." God always calls the unqualified to do the impossible. Apart from the Lord we can do nothing, but with the Lord all things are possible. Thanks be to God! Amen