

The Rev. Jake Miles Joseph
 Plymouth Congregational UCC, Fort Collins, Colorado
 “Texting with God” from Lectionary Reading: 1 Samuel 3: 1-10
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Will you pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be good and pleasing to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On this Sunday of Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, it is important for us to take time to reflect on the life and impact of a great leader and visionary. Of course, we remember that MLK was a community organizing, a grassroots coordinator, and a national hero. What we often overlook, however, is that he was The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. The Bible and its stories, especially the Old Testament in his tradition, would have been the inspiration for his life and work. Today, we have a story that I am sure MLK knew and lived.

The story of Samuel is one of miracles and God in unexpected places and direct communication. Before he was conceived, Samuel’s mother Hannah was found by Eli (the older priest in this story) crying on the steps of the temple begging God for a son. Eli, I am now convinced, must have failed Pastoral Care 101 in seminary because he assumes that Hannah is drunk and tried to send her away rather than help her. Hannah then proves to Eli that she isn’t drunk, and so Eli promises her that she will have a son... so Hannah dedicates her son to God’s service. Soon she gives birth to Samuel, and the minute he is weaned she brings him to the temple and gives him to Eli and the priests to take care of and bring-up. It is paradoxical because she prayed for a son then when she is given a son she gives him away. Let this be a lesson for us that nothing in the Bible is exactly as it seems. This is a reminder that the story we are dealing with today is not from our context or culture or our time.

Now, we catch-up with Samuel when he is a young boy serving and living in the temple (he only sees his parents when they come for high holidays), and he receives a very usual alarm wake-up call! Some of us have odd alarm clock sounds (mine sounds like a cricket—I am now terrified of the sound of crickets), but this is especially weird. How many of you are woken-up at night by God calling your name? Not many of us, right? This is not normal for us, but it is a common theme in Biblical call story narratives of the Old Testament. Our passage today falls into a whole subgenre of Biblical literature called the “Call Story.” This is a genre of Biblical stories that is important to look at when we are talking about how God communicates or doesn’t communicate. While call stories in the Bible often have themes in common, no two are the same. This shows us, even today that each and every individual hears from God differently.

Last week, I was in Arizona at an educational intensive for the Next Generation Leadership Initiative (NGLI) of the UCC for “promising young clergy” (don’t ask me why I was invited...I have no idea). The focus for my class this year was on family systems theory, so there was a lot of sharing. All of us had some great stories to tell, and you know what? None of the 16 in my class and 64 total young ministers there had the

same story or the same way God communicates with us. Likewise, none of the Biblical call stories is like any other.

So today, our job is to see what is unique about Samuel's story, and then I want us to think about how it applies to our world today. Okay, are you ready? Ready to put our Sherlock Holmes hats on and start the investigation? Because there are three big things about Samuel that we need to pay attention to that are unique to this story and offer us clues to our own lives with the Divine.

1. Notice that God demands a dialogue. The first two times God calls his name, Samuel doesn't respond to God, and Samuel rather runs to Eli. We can imagine Eli is getting tired of being woken up. Finally, Eli is probably so tired of being woken-up by Samuel that he says, "Go lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel, Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'" This is fascinating. **God won't do all of the work when you are called to something.** God may still be speaking, as we say in the UCC, but our God does not monologue. God is looking for a conversation, a response, and an action on Samuel's part. So long as Samuel doesn't tell God that he is listening, God won't continue the conversation. God needs dialogue.

Question 1: What is God calling you to in your life right now? What is your response to God in your life? Is something keeping you up at night that you are too scared or don't know how to reply to? What is holding you back? Remember, God is not a God of monologue. You need to say yes or no and engage with these questions rather than sleep through the alarm of God's voice.

2. Alright, so this brings me to the second thing about Samuel's call story that is particular to this account. **Samuel needs help from an elder and a mentor.** Unfortunately for Eli, if you keep reading the account later on, what Samuel has to say once he has listened to God has to do with Eli's family's sins. Sometimes the mentor is the one who has something to learn from the student, but I digress. The main point is that Samuel has to have help discerning how to respond to God's call on his life. Samuel has no shame in waking Eli up not once, not twice, but many times. "Here I am, for you have called me." The Bible doesn't say, but maybe this is something Samuel does often! Unlike other call stories in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, Samuel goes to a mentor and an elder for assistance. This is something NGLI clergy are likewise encourages to do: develop mentoring relationships outside of our home church or home conferences to retain perspective.

Question #2: Who are some mentors or people outside of your own internal knowledge system, household, or person who you can ask for guidance in the calls or decision making processes ahead? Here is a hint: sometimes mentors are not older than you. In a multigenerational church, advice flows both ways. The second thing we learn from Samuel's call story is that sometimes we need to ask others for advice, guidance, or insights to learn how to answer God's call on our hearts that is keeping you up at night?

Who do you need to ask for advice from? On the flip side, pay attention to when in life you are called to be Eli—do not be annoyed by the questions, by being woken up at night by the discernment of a friend of mentee. In life in community, we are both Samuel and Eli.

3. Okay now for the strangest and coolest part of this particular story! So first, God is a God who wants or requires a yes from us—a dialogue. Then we see how in the story, the community, the mentors, the wisdom of others is essential to the discernment, and now we come to the best part that makes Samuel’s call unique and relevant for our lives. Verse 10: “Now the Lord **came and stood there, calling as before**, “Samuel, Samuel!” Now the Lord came and stood there. **God meets us where we are**. God doesn’t give up on your purpose. You are valuable, loved, and followed by God. When Samuel doesn’t respond to simply being called, God tries a new tactic, a different approach for a different call: God comes and stands right by Samuel’s bedside and yells in his ears. “SAMUEL! Wake-up!”

Question #3: Do you know that God won’t give up on you? Did you know that? I know that. Additionally, each of you is being called, no matter how old or how young (Elis and Samuels alike) to new adventures with the Spirit. I know that. I feel it in my bones, friends. Let me ask it again: Do you know that God won’t give up on you?

Let’s pull all of this together. On this Martin Luther King Jr. weekend when we remember one in our own time who was called to something extraordinary, we need to all think about what God is calling us to do in this world. What is our greater purpose for a time such as this?

What the call story of Samuel reveals is that God is a God who is looking for a dialogue, a conversation, a two way street and requires your response. God doesn’t want to talk at you. God wants to talk with you. Secondly, mentors, community, elders, and getting advice from other people are good ways to figure out how to respond to God. Don’t be afraid to wake someone else up and alert him or her to your problem even multiple times. You are not in this, this current dilemma, and this Meshuggeneh life alone. Thirdly, and most exciting and unique to this story, know that God doesn’t give-up on you and you have a purpose that God is moving through your being and your life. Are you all with me?

Let me now in closing take this one step further. A common theme in my preaching is what I see as disconnect between our lives as Mainline Christians (an imagined life that looks a lot like 19th Century Victorian Vermont) and the real life we struggle through on the other hand.

The disconnect I see possibly arising here is that you all, like me, might think that God is going to only speak to you when you are on a meditation retreat or sitting in silence, or staring into the actual physical face of a stranger. Here is the reality: What actually is most likely to wake you up at 2 AM? For me, it is a text message from one of you with an

emergency or a call. A text from my mom... who wakes up at 5 in the morning and sends inspirational quotes to her adult children.

While we like to idealize how God communicates with us, just like we idealize God as having stopped speaking a longtime ago (that would be convenient), I have to tell you that the Divine Deity is more tech savvy than your computer programming grandchildren. While the divine can and does speak to us in voice and in spirit on those yoga retreats or palates pilgrimages, we also find God sightings and marking on text messages from a friend in need, in a Facebook post from a wise friend, or in the emails from a stranger reaching out for help.

Look for God in the text messages, in the emails, in the online materials. Our God sightings are no longer limited to face to face. Treat the texts and emails you write with the same care as in-person interactions, for it matters just as much now.

It is a brave new world. It is a world in need of new call stories to be told, and I think I know of just the congregation to tell their stories and to bring something new to a time such as this. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, Plymouth, Plymouth! And Plymouth said, "Speak for your servants are listening, reading, following." We are ready for what God has to say. Amen.