

Calling to Clay Jars
1 Samuel 3:1–21
2 Corinthians 4:5-12

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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1 Samuel 3:1–21

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and he said, “Here I am!” and ran to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call; lie down again.” So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, “Samuel!” Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.” Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “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.”

Then the Lord said to Samuel, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.” Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, “Samuel, my son.” He said, “Here I am.” Eli said, “What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.” So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, “It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.”

As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord. The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord.

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live,

we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Our story picks up with the Hebrew people, about two hundred years after the events we spoke about last week. The Hebrew people have not only gotten out of the wilderness, they have conquered the Promised Land and settled down.

The main worship center for the people at this time is at a place called Shiloh. Everyone goes to the tabernacle, a kind of divinely-designed tent, to make sacrifices to the Lord. The chief priest in Shiloh is named Eli, and he has two adult sons, named Hophni and Phinehas.

Hophni and Phinehas are, like their father, ordained priests of the Lord. That was how that worked in those days. And, well, sometimes today, too.¹

But Hophni and Phinehas are thieves and abusers, who steal from the offerings to the Lord and sleep with the women who serve in the tabernacle. They take for themselves offerings that belong to the Lord, and they threaten people with violence when they don't get what they want. They are not fit to be priests.²

Into that environment, a little boy is added to the priestly household, a boy named Samuel. The birth of Samuel is a great story, starting with his faithful mother, Hannah, the barren woman who prayed year after year, and finally received a son.

She dedicates him to the Lord, which meant something different in those days than it apparently does today. She leaves him there at the tabernacle, to serve God, and he grows up as

¹ For anyone who does not get the reference: my father is a retired pastor and sitting in the congregation. His father, too, was a pastor, and his father before him, going back many generations.

² 1 Samuel 2. There is no information provided regarding consent when the priests slept with the women who served in the Tabernacle, but their positions of power over the women (physical, social, and positional power) mean that today we would call this sexual harassment at least, if not rape.

an apprentice priest. Everyone knows Samuel, and everyone knows that he is a good kid, beloved of God and of the people. He is a contrast to Hophni and Phinehas in every way.

Eli knows that his sons are abusing the people and abusing their positions. He tries to tell them that this is unacceptable and to warn them of consequences, but they refuse to listen to him. They are out of control.

This is the context for the story that Pam read this morning. Samuel is a young man. He hears God's call, when God's priest, Eli, does not.

Many years ago, shortly after Lisa and I moved into our house, my stepson Harry was in high school, and living in the walk-out basement.³ We discovered that there were mice down there. Believing that I was being very clever with my high-tech solution, I went and bought some nifty little devices that plug into an electrical outlet and emit an ultra-high-pitched whine that drives mice out of an area. I scattered a few of them around, figuring that they would solve the mice problem. They did, temporarily.

What I did not understand was that I could not hear that high-pitched whine, but younger ears than mine could. These things drove poor Harry crazy, until he simply unplugged them. We fought about this, with me asserting that there was no way he could hear them – I couldn't hear them, his mother couldn't hear them, and they were supposed to be ultrasonic. His response was that the theory was very nice, but he could hear them and they were making him just as crazy as they were supposed to make the mice. Each of us was positive that he was in the right, and the other was being obstinate and unreasonable.

³ Yes, I called Harry and got his permission to tell this story.

What neither of us understood is that changes take place in the human ear that around the age of thirty, the age I was at the time. The human ear literally stops being able to hear certain high pitches that a younger person can hear. I hear from Harry that some clever high school and college students are now using that same high-pitched whine as a cell phone ringtone, so that they can hear it and their teachers cannot.

The teachers cannot hear it, but it is real, nonetheless.

Samuel hears a call from God. He goes to the priest, who tells him to listen.

God tells Samuel that the family of Eli will be destroyed, because he did not effectively restrain his sons, who were doing evil in the Lord's name. Samuel hesitates to tell Eli this, but he does, and Eli accepts the judgment.

Later, both of Eli's sons are killed in the same battle, and the Ark of the Covenant is stolen by the Philistines.⁴ Eventually the Lord compels the Philistines to return the Ark, and, basically from that time forward, Samuel is the leader of the Hebrew people. He serves as Judge and priest and ruler.

When Samuel becomes old, he appoints his sons as judges. That does not work, because, like the sons of Eli a generation before, they are lesser sons of a great father. They take bribes and pervert justice. The story goes on from here, but we'll pick that up next Sunday.

What are we supposed to take from this story of Samuel's call? It is important, or the people who wrote down the Bible would not have written it down. You notice that, unlike social

⁴ 1 Samuel 5

media, the Bible is distinctly light on descriptions of people's breakfasts, and other details that only matter to them. The Bible tells stories that matter.

Well, there are some things to notice in this story.

The first is that we are all called.

We are all called to live lives worthy of the calling that God has given us. The counter-cultural value of loving our neighbors never goes out of style. Perhaps because, according to the world out there, it was really never in style.

We all have specific callings. You may not be a pastor. You may be a teacher, or a nurse. You may be someone who mentors and teaches other people, whether you call that being a teacher or not. You may be someone who takes care of other people, whether you call that being a nurse or not. You may be a parent, and/or a grandparent. You may be a spouse. You may be a child, or a sibling. You may be any or all of these. You have multiple roles in your life every day.

Every relationship that you have with someone else is a calling. How you treat that other person or other people reflects your response to God's call on your life.

Another aspect of this story I have already mentioned: Samuel heard the call, Eli did not. Sometimes you may hear a call from God that someone else may not. That includes people who are older than you are, or people who are supposed to be wiser than you are, or people who are authority figures. That does not make them frauds. That does not make them bad servants of God. Eli was certainly neither. It means that you are Samuel in this interaction, not Eli. Your job

is to truly listen to the call that you hear, and to seek the wisdom of others in how to live into this call.

Sometimes someone else may hear a call from God that you do not. That does not make you a fraud. That does not make you a bad servant of God. It just means that you're Eli in this interaction, not Samuel. You need to listen to the call that this other person has heard, and help them to "try the spirits, to see if they are of God."⁵

We are all called, but all of us have God's call and God's Word and God's love, stored in clay jars. We are all imperfect vessels, not nearly as perfect the calling we bear.

We have already spoken about Abraham, whose faith came and went with the tides, it seemed. We have spoken about Jacob, God's own con man. We've spoken about Moses, the fugitive murderer who led his people out of slavery. Next week we will speak about David, the adulterer and worse who served God as warrior and king and founder of a dynasty.

All of them were called, but all of them were, "Golden boy[s] with feet of clay."⁶ All of them lived out their calls, but not without being flawed human beings who messed up sometimes. That did not mean that they were not called. That did not mean that their calls were somehow less than the calls of other people. It means that they were ordinary messed-up human beings whose mistakes were their own, but whose calling came from God.

You know what? That makes them like you, and like me.

⁵ 1 John 4:1.

⁶ "Golden boy with feet of clay, / Let me help you on your way. / A proper push will take you far - But what a clumsy lad you are!" Stephen R Donaldson, *Lord Foul's Bane* (1978), chapter one.

So, listen for God's call to you in the world around you. You may hear God's call in your reading of Scripture. You may hear God's call in someone else's words. You may hear God's call in a situation, where you say to yourself, "That's not right!"

God's call is there. We are all called, and not one of us is too flawed to take up God's call and follow where God leads us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.