

Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 14, 2018
The Rev. Jamie Samilio

Don't Worry, He'll Call Back

Steve Garnaas-Holmes wrote: God, so many voices call to me. I turn so many ways. They are not you. Help me hear your true voice, the clear, calm voice at the center of every cry, the quiet, steady voice that knows my name, the mystery that speaks in ways only my deepest heart hears. Help me hear the silence within the noise and turn to listen. Speak, Holy One, for I am listening.

How do we know it is God calling us? In the lesson, we find Samuel—and Samuel did not yet know the word of the Lord, he was not aware of the power of God, not fully schooled in religious tradition. He is in the service of Eli, asleep on the floor of the temple. He awakens, clearly hearing his name being called. Samuel assumes the voice is that of his master Eli, and runs to Eli's side. This happens multiple times, and after the third call, Eli told Samuel to answer, "*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.*"

Imagine for a moment that you are Samuel, and you are sleeping in the temple next to the Ark of the Covenant – how awesome would that have been? Imagine the quiet, silence. There were no cell phones, sirens passing, TV droning in another room, radio, cars, neighbors outside chatting—just silence. It is estimated by several sources*, that the average American is exposed to as many as 5,000 advertising messages per day – most of which we are not even conscious we have seen them—confusion and signs—sign, *everywhere a sign*, and not the kind of sign you equate with God calling you. We have become so accustomed to them, that they have become background to us. Noise, even white noise has replaced silence to many. Imagine, being quiet enough to hear your heart beat, to hear the small still voice within, calling you to love. We need the silence to hear the steady voice that knows our names. We need to hear past the noise, and hear the silence within the noise and listen. That is how we hear God's call.

Mark 13 gives us a warning about listening to the voice of God, "*Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many.*" We are not listening in silence, but in a very noisy world. The noise gives the Devil an opportunity to turn us in the wrong direction. What I know is this, when God speaks to me it is in words of truth and it is always said out of love. Truth however, does not erase the existence of the evil, but it does make evil visible to the world.

Still, it is difficult to know for sure when God is calling us. For many years I worked for American Airlines, and I would fly all over the country training people in aircraft servicing. One day, I was on my way to Buffalo, NY from Washington, DC for a class, and my flight was delayed. I had about two hours to wait and it was around noon-time, so I went to Legal Seafood to have lunch.

Because I was by myself, I was seated on the bench side of a two-person table next to the server station where they ring up your checks. There was a large wooden panel—like a wall really—directly on my right. To my left were tables along the corridor where people were bustling past us through the airport.

I love calamari with marinara sauce, and being half Italian, I particularly love the marinara sauce. I had almost depleted my supply only half way through the calamari. My server, Janice, was standing only about fifteen feet in front of me—I could easily read her nametag—and I called to her, "Janice." When I did this, she immediately looked out at the tables along the corridor, scanning them. A fellow server

walked past, and she stopped her and asked, “Did you call my name?” I could hear the conversation, and the other server answered, “No.”

Then I realized it. The wooden wall I was sitting next to had caused my voice to bounce. I called to her again, but this time using my best “teacher voice.” “Janice, this is God! ‘I have a mission for you.’” Janice’s eyes grew large and nearly popped out of her head, she frantically scanned all the tables of diners along the corridor to see who had spoken to her. I continued, “Get the lady in the green shirt more marinara sauce.” She was close to me, and immediately her head snapped toward me and we looked directly at each other. We both burst out laughing. We commented to each other that we would never forget this story, and anytime I would visit there, Janice would refer to me as, “The voice of God.” Janice was sure she had heard his name called, more than once. She heard that the voice was from God, and there was a mission for her – but it was not God. It was just one more, noisy request for her attention in a loud and demanding world.

Remember Samuel was called four times before he told God he was listening, but God kept calling. When Samuel was given God’s words he then did God’s will. What happens if we fail to answer -- God keeps calling. Perhaps not in the same way, and perhaps with different opportunities, but believe me on this, if we miss our call or if we fail to answer it—God keeps calling.

A word about expectations: In the Gospel today we see Jesus call Phillip, and it appears that Phillip recognized Jesus as the Messiah and he immediately took up his call and did as he was told. He meets Nathanael and tells him, “*Hey, we found him, we found Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth!*” Immediately Nathanael rips on Jesus commenting that where he is from does not match with his vision of what he expected in a messiah. His expectations were not being met, as he had a vision of how things would be when they found the messiah. When Nathanael finally meets Jesus, he is blown away by what Jesus knows about him being under the fig tree. God comes to us in unexpected ways, from surprising places, and often, when we least expect it. We need to trust God, and then become willing to answer the call. Jesus exceeded Nathanael’s expectations, but Nathanael had to let go of his preconceived notions and fear of not being in control, to be open to receive Jesus.

I do not think I am alone in having ideas and expectations about when and how God will call me. We get an image in our heads about how, with our skills and talents, we will serve God when called. Sometimes we are so sure of what God wants, we do it even before we are asked! I know I did. We can get so caught up in giving the answer we know is right, we fail to hear the true question being asked. The best phrase I have ever heard explaining the tension between our expectations of God calling us, and what God actually wants us to do is, “People plan, God laughs.” Sylvia, who is walking with me on the path God has called me, was asked by the commission on ministry what she expected in my answering God’s call to ministry. Sylvia answered, “I am planning...on being spontaneous.”

My own experience of God calling went something like this: God called and said he wanted me to be a priest. I responded, “I think you may want to hang up and dial more carefully until you get the right person to answer this call.” But God kept calling. Sometimes, answering a call requires change, I was going to have to follow my heart, and not work it out in my head, or worry who I would become if I answered the call – I had to get over the fear. I have heard it said, that people do not fear change, they fear loss. Every time we exchange fear for love, we participate in, and witness a miracle. God calls us through the yearnings of our hearts, and what I have learned is that if you follow your heart, you will surely cross paths with God. Remember what God said to Isaiah, “*For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.***”

God, so many voices call to us. We turn so many ways. They are not you. Help us hear your true voice, the clear, calm voice at the center of every cry, the quiet, steady voice that knows our names, the mystery that speaks in ways only our deepest heart hears. Help us hear the silence within the noise and turn to listen. Speak, Holy One, for we are listening.

There are many opportunities answer God's call, and not all of God's calls to us are momentous, or involve becoming priests, changing careers, giving up all of our possessions. I think most often God calls us to simply respond to everyone we encounter with love. To exchange fear of the other for love of the other, may be the greatest call of all, and to answer that call, we just need to control our responses. Victor Frankle said, "*There is a space between stimulus and response. And, in that space lies our opportunity to choose our response.*"

When you leave here today, take time in stillness -- just "be" in that space. Listen for God, and choose your response. If you are uncertain and cannot answer the call, worry not, God will call back. Amen

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* <http://blog.telesian.com/how-many-advertisements-do-we-see-each-day/>

**Isaiah 41:13 (NIV)

Man's Search for Meaning by Victor Frankle