

When God Calls

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Church
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Scripture Readings

1 Samuel 3:1-10 (Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18)

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

John 1:43-51

Sermon

In the last year, lots of folks have become fans of the PBS series *Downton Abbey*. The series has been acclaimed from multiple directions, and rightly so. It really is that good.

Downton Abbey is set during a period of great social change. Hemlines are rising. War is erupting. Technology is advancing. During the first season, two telephones were installed in the house, one upstairs for the Crawley family and one downstairs for the servants – or to be more precise, for Mr. Carson, the butler.

In one humorous scene, Mr. Carson wants to practice using the telephone, but he has no idea how it's done. That's hard for us to imagine. We take telephones for granted. They've been in our houses forever. And by now we can't imagine not having a phone in our purse or pocket. But how strange it must have been when telephones first appeared!

Probably not to young people, though. Young people take to new technology like ducks take to water. Of course, to start things rolling, they have to encounter the new technology for the first time. That first encounter may include a bump or two.

TAKE SAMUEL. WHEN HE WAS still a boy, *the word of the LORD was rare and visions were not widespread* (1 Samuel 3:1). So when Samuel first encountered the word of the LORD, he had no idea what to make of it. He was lying down for the night, when he heard a voice calling him. *Samuel, Samuel*, the voice said. The boy thought it was his master Eli. But he was wrong. A second time the voice called him, *Samuel, Samuel*. A second time the boy thought it was a Eli. A second time he was wrong. The same thing happened a third time.

It was the word of the LORD. But Samuel didn't recognize the LORD's voice. It was unfamiliar to him. Finally, with a little help from Eli, Samuel was ready to hear. When the LORD called him a fourth time, the boy replied, *Speak, for your servant is listening* (1 Samuel 3:10). From then on, Samuel knew how to hear the voice of the LORD. And following the voice of the LORD, he led the people of Israel.

SUPPOSE GOD WANTED TO CALL you or me – or all of us. Would we recognize his voice? Would we know how to respond to his voice? Would we even be able to hear God’s voice to begin with?

I’m pretty sure I’ve told you before how I can be in the middle of a conversation with someone when all of a sudden Jan says something to me. Instantly, I can’t hear the person I’m talking with any more. All I can hear is Jan. For the most part, that’s probably a good thing for a husband and wife.

I wish I could say it was the same with God. I wish I could say that when God speaks, that when God wants to get my attention, every other conversation disappears and all I can hear is the voice of God. I wish I could say that. But with God it’s more like Jan trying to tell me something when I’m in the laundry room.

Our washer and dryer aren’t whisper-quiet, high-efficiency models. They don’t shake the floors or anything. But when you’re in the room with them, it’s hard to hear what someone is saying just next door in the kitchen. It’s even hard for me to hear Jan’s voice! So if I want to hear Jan, I need to get out of that noisy room and get some place closer to her.

IF I HAD TO GUESS – AND I’LL ADMIT to doing a lot of guessing when it comes to God; God isn’t someone I know very well, not really – if I had to guess, I would say that if I want to hear God, I need to get myself out of a noisy room and into a quieter space.

Here’s what I mean. I don’t know about you, but I have this almost non-stop monologue going on in my head. All kinds of thoughts are chasing each other around from one end of my mind to the other. It’s a conversation of sorts, a conversation with myself. And it’s not always the best conversation. There’s lots of self-centeredness, lots of fear and doubt, lots of pride, lots of confusion, scheming, and more.

But if I want to hear God, I need to silence this infernal, internal conversation. Or at least, I need to leave the room where this conversation is going on endlessly, and I need to listen for God. Not that I have to have silence. But I need to start paying attention to what’s happening around me, to what’s going on in the rough and tumble of everyday life. Because God may be trying to get through to me in a sunset or in a song. God may be trying to get through to me in a conversation I’m having not with myself, but with a friend, or maybe even with an enemy!

But here’s the thing. I’m not a boy any more. Not like Samuel. Not for a long time. Yet I feel totally unequipped for this, totally unequipped to really listen for and to really hear God. The church has never made a point of teaching me how to listen. And I have nothing to teach you about it.

And I’m feeling the lack of it. I’m feeling hollow. I’m feeling something of a hunger, a desire to learn how to listen for God. Is that, maybe, God calling me? Is God saying, *Bob, Bob!* And if it is God, will I listen?

MAYBE GOD IS CALLING YOU. Maybe there’s something nagging at you, some thought that won’t let go of you. Not an evil thought. Not a selfish thought. But maybe a risky

thought, a thought that would change your life if you acted on it. Maybe God has planted that thought in your mind.

Maybe you've seen something happening with one of your friends. Maybe she's starting to do something new with her life, something really good. Maybe it's something demanding and rewarding at the same time. Maybe, through your friend, God is showing you something that you lack. Not that you covet what your friend has found. But that your eyes have been opened to something genuinely good, to something that wouldn't be a new possession for you, but a new passion and a new perspective.

PSALM 139 SAYS THAT GOD knows us thoroughly. That God knows us better than we know ourselves. And that God has plans for us, plans that we could never figure out for ourselves. First Corinthians 6 says that God is actually living in each one of us by the Holy Spirit. Samuel encountered the LORD in the temple. The Apostle says that our bodies are temples, temples in which the Holy Spirit lives. If that's true, then we are really ripe for an encounter with God, to meet up with God, who is as close to us as our own spirit.

But how will something like that ever happen? Can we make an encounter with God happen?

In this morning's reading from John 1, Jesus decides to go to Galilee. And then it's Jesus who finds Philip. And it's Jesus who calls him. *Follow me*, he says. Later, when Nathanael is coming toward Jesus, it's Jesus who starts the conversation. First Samuel says that, when Samuel was still a boy, visions were not widespread. The reading from John 1 is all about vision. It's all about seeing, especially about those who follow Jesus and what they will see.

Once again, it's about an encounter with God, whether through visions of God's glory or through hearing God's voice. To stick with the voice of God, do we hear when God calls us? How can we hear?

SOME OF YOU REMEMBER A TIME when we would jump to answer the telephone whenever it rang. There was always a conversation worth having. Telemarketers changed that. We stopped answering the phone right away, especially at supper time. These days we have caller id on our home phones and on our cell phones. These days we all screen our calls. And when it's a number we don't recognize, or when the caller id says *Private* or *Restricted* or *800 Service*, we're not too likely to answer.

Did you ever wonder if you've screened out a call from God? Not on your phone, of course, but in your heart, in your mind, in your spirit? Did you ever wonder if you've closed yourself off from God? Maybe not on purpose, but maybe you've just shut yourself off from what's going on around you. Maybe you've put out the *Do Not Disturb* sign. Maybe you've put yourself on a do-not-call list, because you really don't want to be bothered by anyone or anything. And now maybe even God can't get through.

I HAVE A SPECIAL RINGTONE on my cell phone for when Jan calls. It's the only special ring I have. I've always had a special ringtone for Jan. I want to know, I want to know without a doubt, when Jan is calling me. I wonder if there's a way to have a special ringtone for God, a way for us to know when God is trying to get through, a way to know for sure that it's God calling.

Maybe there is a way. Maybe somewhere, somehow, the church knows that way. Maybe we can learn it. Maybe we can learn how to know for sure when it's God calling us.

Suppose we could do that. Suppose we could. And suppose God did start to call us. Suppose God started calling you. Would you be ready to answer? Would you be ready to drop whatever you're doing and answer? Would you be ready to do that? Would I?

Maybe that's the real question.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.