



Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Knoxville, TN  
January 14, 2024  
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble  
Sermon: "God Calling"

**1 Samuel 3:1-20 (NRSV)**

3:1 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.

3:2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room;

3:3 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.

3:4 Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!"

3:5 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.

3:6 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."

3:7 Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

3:8 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.

3:9 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.

3:10 Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

3:11 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.

3:12 On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end.

3:13 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.

3:14 Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever."

3:15 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.

3:16 But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am."

3:17 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."

3:18 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."

3:19 As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

3:20 And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.

### **“God Calling”**

At the men’s breakfast this past Thursday, Westminster had two guests:

Karen Armsey is the Program Administrator for the UT H.A.B.I.T. Program, which stands for Human Animal Bond in Tennessee. H.A.B.I.T. dogs, cats, and rabbits are trained  
to go into schools,  
go into hospitals,  
go into treatment centers to care for people in stress.

Our other guest was Karen's huge, black poodle mix named, appropriately for our worship service this week, and I'm not making this up. The dog's name was Shiloh. The same name as the place where Samuel received his call.

We learned Habit dogs can smell stress in their air. They sense who is having the worst time in any given room, and will turn their attention right there.

As Karen explained this, I kept wondering why her dog Shiloh spent most of the morning going back and forth to Gradye Parsons all morning. He seemed relaxed enough.

At the beginning of the hour, Karen told us a number of Habit dog stories. She spoke of a Marine veteran, a young man in his twenties, who received a rare diagnosis of breast cancer after being discharged, and found himself right in the middle of breast cancer treatment centers, which if you've ever been to one, don't have many young male veterans around.

So he was feeling lost:  
in the diagnosis,  
in the treatment for the diagnosis,  
in this unexpected life following the marines.

His first time at the breast cancer treatment center, he came in, just this tight ball of stress, and sitting in the waiting room, a Habit dog came up to him, and the man just started  
hugging him,  
hugging him,  
eventually crying over him.

Karen told another story at a junior high school. As she was walking the halls, she heard someone having a meltdown in the principal's office. Afterward, she went into a classroom, and a young man came in immediately after her, and immediately put his head on the desk, put his hoodie over his head. It was the same child she heard in the office.

Karen's Habit companion at the time was a giant Great Pyrenees, just this huge mop of white hair. And, seeking out the person with the greatest stress in the room, the Great Pyrenees went to the young man, and flopped his huge white head right on the desk. Eventually, as dogs do with their nuzzle, he just inched his way into

the boy's hoodie – just the boy and the dog under there. A few minutes later, she heard the boy talking to the dog. A few minutes after that, she saw the boy put his arm around the dog.

Sometimes we can get stuck. Both of those stories are about people who were stuck, in circumstances, in systems, in lives, where they felt they didn't have anywhere good to go.

Stuck – yet they became unstuck, by a being, covered in fur, who showed them just how loved they were.

Have you ever felt stuck before? Maybe the better question is: where you do feel stuck now?

Biblical Scholar Walter Brueggemann begins his commentary on First Samuel with an excerpt from a Gail Godwin novel. It is a speech from one character to another about getting stuck.

*There are two kinds of people, this character begins. One kind you can tell just by looking at them at what point they congealed into their final selves. It might be a very nice self, but you know you can expect no more surprises from it...[T]he other kind keeps moving, changing. With these people, you can never say, 'X stops here,' or 'Now I know all there is to know about Y.' That doesn't mean they're unstable...far from it. They are fluid. They keep moving forward and making new trysts with life, and the motion of it keeps them young. In my opinion, they are the only people who are still alive. You must constantly be on your guard, against congealing.<sup>1</sup>*

*You must constantly be on your guard, against congealing.  
Are you on your guard, against congealing?*

The time of Samuel could be said to be a congealed time.

Eli and his family ruled the spiritual life at Shiloh as its priests, but the spiritual life there was flat. Eli, near retirement, had lost his sense of call. It was a job, not a calling. When Hannah, Samuel's mother, has a rare spiritual experience of God in

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<sup>1</sup> Gail Goodwin, *The Finishing School*, quoted in Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 7. I rely on Brueggemann's exegesis of the passage in the pages that follow. See *First and Second Samuel*, 22-28.

Shiloh at the beginning of the book, Eli accuses her of being drunk: She must be drunk, he reckons, because God doesn't speak at Shiloh.

Eli's sons are worse. They skim from top, taking what is offered to God as their own, and they threaten violence to anyone who gets in their way:

"You must give it now," they say, "if not, [we] will take it by force," (2:16).

The result of the sons' abuse and Eli's apathy, our reading begins, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."

So, it is no surprise then, that when God speaks, no one recognizes it.

One,

Two,

Three times God calls Samuel, and Samuel goes to Eli, thinking the old man had called him. Only after the third time, does Eli discern what is happening:

*Go, lie down; and if [God] calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'*

Take note of that. Despite their stuckness, when God speaks, the characters of this story listen:

In the opening chapters, when Samuel's mother Hannah prays to God for a child, and God hears her cry and she becomes pregnant with Samuel, Hannah does not go away quietly. Rather, in one of the greatest songs of Scripture, she proudly proclaims,

*The bows of the mighty are broken [but]  
God raises up the poor from the dust;  
God lifts the needy from the ash heap.*

And Samuel, once he understands what is happening, responds to God's call, becoming one of the greatest prophets of the Hebrew Bible, eventually leading Israel to choose its first king Saul, and then following Saul, King David.

And even Eli, even apathetic Eli, on his last days of the job, when God condemns his inaction and proclaims the ruin of his house for the sins of his family, Eli responds in faith.

vs. 18: *So Samuel told Eli everything and hid nothing from him. Then Eli said, 'It is the Lord; let God do what seems good.'*

Hannah's faithfulness  
 Samuel's faithfulness  
 Even Eli's faithfulness

Their faithfulness shows that, when you feel stuck, God will still call. Life can begin again.

Where do you feel stuck these days?

On this weekend when we celebrate the birth of one of the great modern prophets, Martin Luther King, Jr., we are reminded of a certain type of stuckness.

We are stuck, if all we remember, all we honor tomorrow is a sanitized version of Martin Luther King: the colorblind King, whose one and only line was that he dreamed that his "children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." That is a beautiful and still deeply relevant dream, but we err if we use it to reduce King's message to a bland statement about how race shouldn't matter, while we neglect King's call for deep, structural change in this country, change we have yet to see in this country. If we reduce King's dream to a tame address against personal prejudice, we remain stuck in systems of deep racial inequality, near and far.

Yet, on the other hand, if we hear about those systems, and that history, that deeply indicts our lives of privilege, and we shrug our shoulders, saying well, it's is too big,

- history is too big,
- the system is too big, what are ya gonna do?
- What could we possibly do?

That's a whole other type of stuckness, isn't it? Where we lose the fight before we've even started, and Monday becomes a reminder, simply a reminder, of all we cannot do.

I read this week that King actually went down to Montgomery in the first place to get out of his own personal stuckness.<sup>2</sup> In his late twenties, he had just finished his doctoral work at Boston University. His grandfather and then his father, who in the family was known as Daddy King, had held the pulpit of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, one of the flagship black churches of that city, and King, under his father's urging, was the natural choice to inherit that family legacy.

Instead, King wanted to break tradition and go further into the deep South, which was becoming a hotbed of the Civil Rights fight at the time.

When King was invited to preach a trial sermon for Dexter Avenue Baptist in Montgomery, he was up against another finalist, his friend Samuel McKinney. McKinney eventually dropped out, not feeling called to the risk of being a young Black pastor in the deep south.

I loved this line. McKinney later wrote, "I asked God if he would follow me into the South, but God said he'd only follow me to Cincinnati."

Breaking with family, breaking with expectations, breaking with fear, King went to Montgomery. Because he wanted to stay open, rather than have his life prescribed for him.

Because his story, like Hannah's, like Samuel's, like Eli's story, is one of stuck people becoming unstuck by following God's call. And the Spirit does not abide by stagnation, but instead calls us forward.

These stories remind us that we are not frozen in our ways of being, even when every day feels like just another day,  
just another day,  
just another day.

They remind us, we do not live a congealed life, we live the life of faith.

And so, when you turn on the news this week, and you think, 'I just can't listen to the news again this week,' you remember, that God is calling you to be a part of

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<sup>2</sup> See Jonathan Eig, *King: A Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023).

God's people, not in spite of, but precisely in the midst of the world we live in right now.

And as we find ourselves a part of deeply unjust, unequal systems of power and oppression:

- Generational poverty
- Segregation in this city
- Unaffordable housing
- The opportunity gap in school and in work

We don't throw up our hands; we don't walk away and say things will never change, because God is at work making things change. Sometimes you just have to have the eyes to see, or rather, ears to hear, ears to hear God speaking life into void, speaking change into the congealed places, calling us to be a part of that change.

Because God is always calling. Always calling. Sometimes its monumental. Sometimes, it's simply to look around, to look around and see your neighbor who is stuck. To see who needs a reminder, that they are not alone.

And when you feel alone, when you feel stuck, remember, sometimes it's been in the bleakest moments where God's people have heard God's call:

Remember Hannah, Samuel, Eli,

Cry out, into the silence,

“Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”

And look around. And listen. Amen.