

“Hello? It’s God calling. Is anybody listening?”

Two of today’s Bible readings are about what happens when God calls someone to do something. We heard the story of how God called Samuel to a position of leadership over Israel. And we heard the story of how Jesus called Nathanael to be one of his disciples.

They’re both impressive stories. In fact, I’m really not aware of any story in the Bible, when God called someone to do something, that wasn’t an impressive story. And that has led to a problem for many people. Because it seems to suggest that the more impressive the experience surrounding the call, the more authentic the call. But that’s not always the case.

Years ago, when I was a teenager attending St. George Episcopal Church in San Antonio, I listened to a man talking about his life’s ministry as a teacher. And he told us how, very early on, he struggled with the direction his ministry was to take. You see, he had received two job-offers wherein he could exercise his ministry, and he prayed fervently about which job to accept. He seemed to get no specific response from God about which job he should take, so he prayed on and on and on about it. Finally, God spoke to him. The speaker said he thought God had spoken to him in an audible voice, but he couldn’t be sure. But this is what the voice said to him: “I simply called you to be a teacher. I don’t care where you teach. I just think you’ll be a good teacher, so get to it!”

I’ve always liked that story because it reminds me that, sometimes, I worry too much about the specifics about what I think God may be calling me to do. However, I think God wants us to have some say in the matter, so that we’ll have more ownership of whatever it is we’re called to do. Because when that happens, we’ll be more passionate about what we’re doing, and find more satisfaction in it, and more joy. And that’s important.

But calls can be problematic. Sometimes they’re hard to hear. Sometimes they can be imagined. And sometimes they can be misunderstood. Therefore – and especially in the Episcopal Church – we understand that every call from God has two components. First, there is the interior call, in which God talks to *me*. And then, there is the exterior call, in which God talks to *others* about me. It’s something like a divine system of checks and balances.

I’ve seen the calling process work in a couple of ways. Most common is for the individual to receive the interior call first, and then the community receives the confirming exterior call. This would be the case for Samuel; God first spoke to him first. But in the case of Nathanael, in today’s gospel, the exterior call came first; Jesus called him into discipleship, and then later he was able to sense a confirming interior call. So, sometimes the interior call comes first, and at other times it’s the exterior call that’s first heard.

However, God doesn't just call people to religious ministries, and the doctor who took care of my daughters is a great example. It's obvious to Peggy and me that Dr. Carolyn Davis heard a call to go into pediatric medicine. She might not have recognized it as a call from God, but I think it was. At some point in time, Dr. Davis felt drawn, compelled, or attracted to pediatric medicine. That was the interior call. And the exterior call, the confirming call, came from her patients, and especially the parents of her patients, who trust her, and who want Dr. Davis to be their children's doctor.

Even though we have a good system in place, it can still be hard to hear God's call. And, if anything, the readings from 1st Samuel, and John's gospel, tell us that we really have to be paying attention in order to hear God's call.

There is a story of a young man who lived during the Great Depression, who saw a "Help Wanted" ad in the newspaper for a telegraph operator. Although he had studied Morse Code, and was quite proficient at it, he had no actual on-the-job experience. And his heart sank as he joined a roomful of other men seeking the very same job.

Without much hope, he nevertheless sank into a chair, and waited for his name to be called. After only a few minutes, however, his face suddenly brightened up, he jumped up out of his chair and ran into the manager's office. And within a few minutes, the manager appeared at the door to announce that the job had been filled.

One of the other men who had been waiting asked the manager, "What did he say that landed him the job? After all, he was the last one here." The manager answered: "It wasn't anything he said. All morning long I have been tapping out a message on my office window in Morse Code. I made sure that it was loud enough for all of you to hear. The message was this: 'If you can understand this message, come on in. You're hired.' Apparently all that the rest of you heard was noise. But he was listening, and he heard my message."

So, calls can be hard to hear. In the case of Samuel, it was his youth and immaturity, and his lack of experience and understanding, that put him in a place where he simply wasn't paying attention when the interior call came; when God called out his name. And with Nathanael, it was his high level of education that caused him to be a skeptic, and seriously doubt the authenticity of the exterior call when it came; when Jesus called him into discipleship.

Even though calls can work either way – interior then exterior, or exterior first and then interior – even though it can work either way, we have to be especially cautious when the exterior call comes first. Because the classic example of how this can go wrong, is the case when someone comes up to you and says: "God told me to tell you ..." That's happened to me a lot of times, and I'm sure it's happened to you. Now, that might be an authentic exterior call, but if it doesn't soon trigger an awareness of a confirming interior call, you should be very careful; that person may simply be trying to manipulate you, or bolster their own reputation as a "spiritual" person. I may be naive about this, but I still believe that God can get our attention if he really means to.

So, we have a good system in place, but it can be misused by unscrupulous people; even the occasional unscrupulous Christian. In fact, Mark Twain, one of America's greatest writers, may

have had something like this in mind when he was heard to remark: "Having met some good Christian folk, I can understand why Jesus preferred the company of prostitutes and sinners."

Still, it would be nice, wouldn't it, if we could be like Samuel, and hear God's voice and be told what to do? Or, wouldn't it be nice if we, like Nathanael, could be in Jesus' physical presence, and hear with our own ears the things he's telling us to do?

A number of years ago, NBC aired a short-lived religious comedy/drama, entitled "The Book of Daniel." The main character was an Episcopal priest named Daniel Webster. During the course of the first two episodes, so many bad things happened to Daniel, and his family, and his parish, that the show lost any credibility with me. And though there was so much for me to dislike about the show, I remember thinking that they did get one thing right: Daniel had an active prayer life. Daniel talked to Jesus a lot, and he listened to Jesus a lot. He really did. And that may have been the one thing I really appreciated about the show. It's just too bad they didn't get the rest of it right.

How often do we listen to God? How often can we hear God calling out to us? It's not always as easy as it was with Samuel and Nathanael. And rarely is it as dramatic: sometimes our call is simply to be a Christian, which is actually a pretty big job in and of itself. And even though the Church has a system of testing and managing our interior and exterior calls, in the end we must rely on the Holy Spirit to guide the Church and her members, so that, more often than not, the right person gets into the right position, and God's works gets done. Because that's what it's all about.

Let us pray: Holy God, we see your glory in the world about us, but especially in your son, Jesus. Help us to listen as you call each of us by name; renew us by your Holy Spirit, and empower us to be faithful to our calling. Amen.