

A Sermon for Epiphany 2, Year B
January 15, 2006
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It's God calling. Is anybody listening?

Today's readings are about calls. 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 among his disciples. In fact, all of us have been called by God to some ministry or vocation; the most basic call we've all answered is the call to be Christian.

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.

Make no mistake, however; God doesn't just call people to religious ministries, and my daughters' pediatrician is a great example. It's obvious to 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. That was the interior call. And the exterior call, the confirming call, came from her patients, and the parents of her patients, who trust her, and who want Dr. Davis to be their doctor, and 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 two readings we heard this morning – from 1st Samuel and the 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, at

home while he was unemployed, he had no experience. And his heart sank as he joined a roomful of other men seeking the same job.

Without much hope, he sank into a chair and waited. 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, “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 any of you heard was noise: the tap, tap, tapping of my pencil on my office window. He was the only one who listened and heard my message.”

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 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 trigger an awareness of a confirming interior call, you should start seeing red flags; 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. 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?

Last week, NBC premiered a comedic drama entitled "The Book of Daniel." The main character is an Episcopal priest named Daniel Webster. During the course of the first two episodes, so many bad things happened to Daniel, that the show lost any credibility with me. And though there is a lot for me to dislike about the show, I think they do get one thing right: Daniel has an active prayer life. Daniel talks to Jesus a lot, and he listens to Jesus. He really listens.

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 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.

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.