

1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51

14.01.18

### *The call of God*

It is a powerfully evocative passage - just picture the scene: the great temple in Jerusalem at night. The crowds have departed and all is still and an eerie silence hangs over the temple precincts. Deep within the walls however lie two people: an old man, and a young boy who stirs in his sleep. The boy, Samuel is his name, is there because he was a gift to his parents when it appeared that his mother would remain childless, and out of gratitude she has given him back to God to serve in the temple. And the old man is Eli, the priest, whose eyesight is failing... 'he could not see', we are told. And Samuel and Eli lie on their beds, and of course it is very dark, the only light coming from the lamp of God, probably a golden lampstand that was lit every evening and that cast flickering shadows on the walls. And we are told that this lamp had not yet gone out. But as we listen, suddenly, a whisper: 'Samuel! Samuel!' Then the voice of the child: 'Here I am!' And then the sound of the child running to Eli, the priest, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But the boy is sent back to lie down for Eli has not called him. The voice repeats, however, as does Eli's denial, until at last Eli figures out what is happening. 'Next time you hear the voice', he says, 'reply, "speak, Lord, for your servant is listening..."', for Eli discerns that this is none other than the voice of God.

A dramatic passage, therefore, and it invites us to consider this morning the call of God – the fact that in this passage and in our faith we have to do with one who calls us and invites a response, for this is a distinguishing feature of the God of our faith. Again and again we encounter individuals who hear this call and respond in different ways. It might be Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden hearing God call them as they hide from him amongst the trees; or it might be Abram hearing God call him to leave his home and to travel into the unknown; or it might be Moses hearing God call him from a burning bush to free his people; or Isaiah or Jeremiah being called to proclaim God's word to the nation. Or it might be a woman grieving outside the tomb of her beloved Master who has been crucified and who hears her name, 'Mary'. Or it could be a man called Saul, travelling on the road to Damascus to persecute followers of Jesus of Nazareth and who hears his name called. All these of course are big figures in the Bible, called to special tasks. But we

could each replace our names for theirs, for truly there is not a human being in all the world and never has been who God is not calling by name, no matter what they understand of God. Indeed the description of Samuel here in this passage is significant: we are told that he ‘did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him’, and maybe Samuel represents all those who know little or nothing of this God and yet whose souls echo with God’s whisper of their name.

Well, this speaks volumes about God. It speaks of a God who is sovereign and yet personal, yearning for a relationship with every one of us whoever we are. It is the God spoken of in Psalm 139 from which we quoted in our call to worship this morning, a God who knows us intimately and of whom it is said,

If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

And for reasons that will become clear I would like this morning to contrast this with another version of God, that espoused by the great philosopher Benedict Spinoza. Spinoza, of course, was born here in Amsterdam and lived here on and off, even after being expelled as an outcast for his heretical views. He lived in the Dutch Golden Age of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the period that we call the Enlightenment, a time when many old orthodoxies were being questioned, and when the scientific world view was coming to birth - the time of Isaac Newton - and Spinoza contributed hugely to all of that. He was convinced that the delicate intricacies and complexities of nature required a Creator, a higher Spirit who we call God and who he identified with the God of his Jewish faith. The problem, however, was that Spinoza’s God differed from the God of his Jewish faith. Spinoza effectively identified God with the world and its workings – a form of what we would call pantheism. And such a God is not personal and does not interact with us as does the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and Jesus Christ.

What is of interest to us today, however, and why I mention him, is that Spinoza has had something of a come-back recently. It seems that his understanding of God has an appeal in our scientific age for some, like Spinoza, do not wish to entertain the idea of a personal God – and yet for whom the sheer wonder and elegance of science seems to cry out for

transcendence, for some grounding to the universe. So Albert Einstein famously said, 'I believe in Spinoza's God, who reveals himself in the lawful harmony of all that exists, but not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and doings of mankind.' Such a God is not the One whose presence was sensed in the temple that night, calling Samuel by name, but you can see his appeal, not least to a scientist like Einstein, or even arch-atheist Richard Dawkins who has expressed some sympathy for Spinoza's God. This God offers a key to the universe and its baffling order and wonder, while doing away with the difficulties raised by a personal God of love and compassion.

So, to return to our text from 1 Samuel, we saw that the scene here is one of darkness. The lamp of God had not yet gone out but evidently it was burning pretty low, and we're told that the Word of the Lord was rare in those days: visions were not widespread. So this was a time when the light of God's presence was sparse and when God was not speaking. In other words it was a time of God's absence and God's silence. And this is the problem with a personal God: how do we account for the darkness which can be all too real, as some of you know only too well? How do we make sense of suffering? How do we square a personal, loving God with the absence and the silence? Well, maybe the God of Spinoza makes a lot more sense. It gets God off the hook and narrows our expectations if God is but the ground of creation, identical with nature, expressing himself in created realities and revealing himself in the thoughts and the theories and the equations and the theorems of the scientists, but unconcerned with mankind's fate and our joys and our sorrows.

Maybe that is the God for today's scientific world. But it is sad that both Spinoza and Einstein were Jewish, for the persistent, insistent testimony of the Scriptures that shaped them contradicts them. The testimony of the Scripture – as in this story of Samuel – is that just as nature abhors a vacuum, so God ultimately abhors the darkness and the silence and the absence and will sooner or later break in. So Samuel's day may have been one in which the lamp of God glowed weakly, and the Word of God was not heard, but suddenly in the depths of the temple, in the flickering candlelight God is present, and a name is being called.

We find something similar in our other reading from John's Gospel. We read of the call of some of Jesus' disciples, including Nathaniel who on being told that the Messiah has been found and that he comes from Nazareth, responds with incredulity: 'can anything good come out of Nazareth?' We do

not know why Nazareth was such a despised place. We know that it was located in a region associated with uprisings and rebellions against the Romans and which had experienced brutal retaliation. And that may mean that it had known great violence and suffering – but one way or another it seems to have been viewed as a dark place, like the temple in Samuel’s day. Yet as with the temple it is here that God enters. ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Well, maybe the lamp of God burns low there and God’s Word is scarce there but the answer is ‘yes’ for with God it is no surprise when light shines and the silence is broken and Jesus shows up.

Seeing as tomorrow is Martin Luther King Day in the United States, I can’t resist closing with this. It was the Montgomery bus boycott of 1956 and King had received numerous threatening phone call. He writes in one of his sermons of one particular call:

‘I hung up, but I could not go to sleep. It seemed all my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point.

I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally, I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing to be a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I took my problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory.

“I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I have come to the point where I can’t face it alone.”

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, “Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.”

Almost at once my fears passed from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm.’

Three nights later King’s home was bombed but he was unshakeable. In the darkness, with the candle of faith flickering, he had heard the Word and his name called and that was enough.

It's not always easy to believe in a personal, loving God. We may sympathise with Spinoza. But the testimony of Scripture and of Christians is clear. Whether in the temple or in the kitchen, a voice calls in the darkness, and a presence sensed – and something good can indeed come out of Nazareth. Amen.