

**June 3, 2018
1 Samuel 3:1-18
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“Here We Are”

Good morning! This morning you heard a passage from 1 Samuel, a book we'll be spending some time with for the rest of June. This story that Cathy read for us can be a beguiling one, especially if we don't read too far or think too hard about it. But if we think about being called by God -- either as individuals or as a congregation -- we probably need to take a good, hard, biblical look at what we might be getting into.

I don't know about you, but I have heard a voice in the night calling my name. Many times. More often it is my title -- Mom -- and very infrequently Pastor Rosanna. When my children were little, it was a call in person from the nursery or downstairs bedrooms, and later on the phone from school after a late band competition, or from wherever they were stranded and needed a ride or needed help. My kids knew not to call unless it was really important; I'm a great sleeper, but not a very good waker-upper. It's amazing that any of my children survived infancy. When get a phone call from someone from Creekside in the middle of the night or early in the morning, my heart sinks: bad news needs immediate attention; good news can usually wait until daylight. With few exceptions, a call in the middle of the night is a cause for concern. At very least it means that I'm going to have to stop being asleep and comfortable, and have to wake up and deal with something which will probably take effort.

In the past, I have imagined this story of the boy Samuel and his guardian Eli as kind of a cross between a Sunday School lesson and a bedtime story. Precocious Samuel, the little boy who was dedicated by his mom to serve God since before he was born, and has been living with wise old Eli at the temple since he was about three years old. I can imagine Sammy padding down the hall in his footie pajamas

to Eli's room in the middle of the night to see why Eli is calling him. This happens twice until Eli figures out "Oh my goodness! It's God who is calling Samuel." It's Eli who tells him, "Alright Sammy, the next time God calls you say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" And sure enough, there is a next time, and Samuel says "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." Isn't that sweet? It is if you stop reading at that point. But that isn't where the story ends. God does, in fact, speak to Samuel, and God says, "Look, I'm gonna do something which will make both ears of anyone who hears about it tingle." Those are God's words in verse 11. Only this thing that God tells Samuel about, this thing that God is going to do: it is not good news. It's bad news. And it's about Samuel's guardian, dear old Eli. And Samuel has to be the one to tell him. As you might imagine, Samuel lies awake for the rest of that night.

I would like this story of a call from God in the middle of the night a lot better if it had a happier ending. Things do go pretty well for Samuel -- by the end of the chapter we're told that Samuel grew to be a trusted prophet of the Lord. And the biblical text uses this wonderful phrase, "the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground." I pray for that every time I preach. Things don't end so well for Eli, though. Eli was a good man, but his sons dishonored God and the temple. Those boys are killed in a battle with the Philistines, and when a messenger gives Eli the news that the ark of the Lord has been captured and his sons are dead, Eli falls backward out of his chair and breaks his neck and dies.

So what do we do when we get that call in the middle of the night -- maybe it's a call from God, maybe it's a call from the police or from the hospital. The first thing we do is wake up. Wake up, clear the cobwebs and face the reality that this is going to take some effort on our part. Maybe we indulge in a little self-pity on our way out the door: I didn't sleep well *last* night either. Why me? But self-pity isn't going to help us much; we need more than hand-wringing when facing difficult things.

My brother-in-law, Dan, is leaving his long-time position as director of Brethren Volunteer Services this fall. He has a Master's in Social Work, and has started doing therapy with children and adolescents. He asked me to letter a framed piece for his office, a line of a song by

Indiana folk singer Carrie Newcomer. Here's what it says: You can do this hard thing. Those are good words for any of us to remember: you can do this hard thing. God did not call Samuel to tell him what a great kid he was and to keep up the good work. God did not call Samuel to tell him that he had a bright future as a prophet, and God was going to be there to catch his words so they didn't hit the ground. God called Samuel to do a hard thing -- God didn't even ask Samuel to do it -- God just said "Here's what's gonna happen," and Samuel had to figure out how to tell Eli himself.

I've had to wrestle with this passage a bit, because I think it makes God sound kind of mean, and I don't believe that God is mean. So here is where I come out -- at least today -- on the calling of Samuel, and I think it has a lot of relevance for us at Creekside. Ministry has never been an easy thing. There are great needs in our neighborhoods and communities, and God is forever demanding more of us than we feel like we have to give -- this is not because God is mean. It's partly because it's more comfortable to burrow under the covers and try to sleep than it is to wake up and say "Here I am -- or Here we are, Lord." But God also calls us to do hard things because they are God's things, and not our things. The places where God is calling us to ministry are places where God already is. There is not a single place -- not a school or a community building or a hospital room -- where we are called to ministry where God will *not* be with us. There are ministries which need to be done that will only be accomplished by people who are willing to wake up and say, "What do you want, God? We're listening."

You're going to be invited to stay in the Worship Center after the service today to view a short video on Mutual Ministry. Following that, we are asking everyone who can stay to be part of an information session and discussion about the Community Ministry Grant which Creekside has received, and the new ministry which we'll be discovering together in the coming months. Diane Lund and Ron Nicodemus and I attended an orientation session in Indianapolis last month. One of the presenters was talking about the grant process, and said, "This is not like assembling a piece of furniture from a kit where you have a picture of what the end result is supposed to look like, and you have step-by-step directions, and you know if you follow the directions you will end up with a chair like the one in the picture."

This made total sense to me, because I have never in my life had the discipline to read and follow a detailed set of directions. Ask my husband if you think I'm making that up. Like Samuel, we may need to figure out some of the details ourselves; I know this is intimidating for folks who want to see what the chair is supposed to look like before we get started, but the process is actually part of how we learn about ourselves and how God is before us and beside us along the way.

We will be exploring and figuring out what it means for us to do community ministry: ministry where we work *with* our neighbors, rather doing things *for* them. I imagine it might mean some sleepless nights -- nights where we sit up in bed and say, "God, is that You? Is that what we're supposed to do? Isn't that going to be hard?" I think it's unlikely that God will deliver an instruction manual with step-by-step directions for our ministry and what it ought to look like when we're done. But I believe that as long as we join what God has already planned, we can do this hard thing. With God's help and the support of this community, we can do this hard thing. We may even find this hard thing rewarding in ways we could not have imagined.

For years I had a poster by artist illustrator Mary Engelbreit. Here's what it said: No matter where you go, there you are. Brothers and sisters, Here we are. I believe that God has a reason for us to be in this place at this time. I believe that God has ministry for us to do, and we need to listen and say, "Here we are." Our ministry is where we are; our ministry is where God has already been and is calling us to go. We can do this hard thing. Here we are.