

Reflection – 1 Samuel 3:1-20, John 1:43-51  
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Listening to your life

A couple of years ago now, I was participating in a retreat in Lake Mungo. One of the planned activities fell through so in a spontaneous moment, the leader asked us to make a chart with each year of our lives mapped out on the bottom...

We were asked to map the peaks and the troughs and then to look at the visual representation and see where God was at work in our lives...

In a way we were being asked to chat where God was calling us in our lives. And the gift of this experience was to see how God had been moving in so many ways in each of us, ways we probably did not recognise as God, especially the challenges.

We are in the season of Epiphany – where God is revealed in our lives. A season which asks us to sharpen our focus on recognising, paying attention, honouring God's presence in our own lives, particularly as we being a new year...where is God calling you at this moment, at this new year's beginning? (pause)

In today's scripture stories, we heard God calling Samuel by name to become one of the faithful and revered judges and prophets, we also heard the story of Jesus calling the first disciples in the gospel of John.

These stories are pertinent and have a specific resonance today as later on today we are honouring God's call in the life of one of our own in her ministry of lay preaching.

What is this mysterious thing of listening to, or hearing God calling us in our lives? What comes to mind when you think of God calling in your life? It might be a particular moment? Or you might think it refers to a particular thing that does not include your experience, such as a call to a particular kind of ministry.

I friend speaking about ministry ... where were you when you got the call?

And perhaps the call of God in our lives is not so much a call for a particular kind of known ministry, but rather taking seriously a niggling feeling that won't leave us alone. A niggling feeling that may not yet have words to describe it, or has been there for years but seems way too difficult to explore. But how do we distinguish between the niggling feeling that is actually God's wisdom leading us towards life, and our own distraction? This is a known dilemma, and one that many of us would recognise.

One of the key factors, and probably one that is often overlooked is that we need each other, to hear how God's voice speaking to us. The many different traditions of Christian spirituality have a name for this, from Ignatian Spiritual tradition to the Quakers, discernment. To discern where God is speaking to you in your life, where the spirit is leading you towards freedom and abundant life, out of the snares that we can so easily trip on.

Both of today's stories are very different renditions of God's call in the lives of his people. We will look at these in turn, first the story from Samuel and then Jesus calling the disciples in the Gospel of John.

God is physically calling Samuel in the night, calling him by name. In the style of the older testament where God is physically present, walking in the garden, speaking to God's people.

But as we mentioned above it takes another person to recognise it was God's voice calling to Samuel. Eli, the older priest, recognises that it is God calling to Samuel and advises him to listen. We need each other to recognise to discern the voice of God in our lives. And to be alert to the ways God is moving and living in the lives of others where they might not see it themselves. And God is calling Samuel to no easy task, for listening is one part of it, acting in ways that risk and disrupt the status quo is another more challenging task. And yet this is the other side of listening. For where would we be if no one acted on their sense of justice, their sense inner wisdom, the place where God is calling them to live their lives more fully?

In the gospel from John is a very different story of God's spirit moving in the lives of God's people. It is a specific call to follow Jesus, and yet what this actually means to the first disciples, takes time to be revealed, just as it is with all of us. This story is a story of a maturity of faith. Philip, the first person on the scene of the story, immediately follows Jesus, after those two powerful words: 'follow me'. But at first Nathanael, proves to be a harder nut to crack. When Philip expresses that Jesus of Nazareth is the One the prophets and the scriptures have foretold...Nathanael is sceptical. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Curiously Nathanael's belief in Jesus does a complete about face when Jesus recognises him under the fig tree. Nathanael proclaims enthusiastically "You are the son of God, you are the King of Israel!" Tellingly Nathanael is moved to proclaim these words when he feels he is recognised by Jesus. Nathanael has an expectation of who Jesus is, that fits within his own context, the awaited Messiah. Jesus is saying much much more will be revealed to you. Much more than you can ever imagine. This is the beginning of faith, the beginning of belief. Jesus says enigmatically that you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. Nathanael – and all of us who are in the journey of faith – the barrier between heaven and earth will remain 'open'. Jesus is the gate. God's love is part of all creation, pervasive in our lives, in the very ordinary, everyday, in the peaks and the troughs as in those maps of our lives.

Our task is really to stop, to ask, to listen – like Samuel to say 'here I am Lord', speak, for your servant is listening. So this year take the risk to listen to that niggling voice, listen to that inner hunger or seek out some spiritual direction to help discern the way God's love is calling you towards abundant life.