

Call Waiting

1 Samuel 3:1--4:1

Samuel was one of those children born rather late in the life of a woman who dearly wanted a child. To have a child was Hannah's most earnest prayer. Indeed, the writers of the scriptures regarded a child born late in life as an indication of God's special favor. Hannah, Samuel's mother, must have thought so too, and while he was still an infant, as soon as he was weaned, he was offered into the service of the Lord in thanks to God for his birth. That's how it happened that this young boy named Samuel came to live with and serve as a kind of apprentice under a priest named Eli. Samuel lived and slept right there in what was called the Tent of Meeting, which served as a center of worship years before a permanent temple was built. So, he grew up there under the influence of the old priest who was his mentor and example.

The account tells us that Samuel was called by the Lord while Samuel was still a young boy. Jewish scholars have held that it was probably about age 12. It happened early one morning, for the scripture tells us that the lamp that burned in the tent all night had not yet gone out. Young Samuel heard his name called - "Samuel, Samuel." Thinking that Eli had called, the boy obediently ran to him, saying "Here I am." But Eli declared he had not called and told him to go back to bed again. But once again Samuel heard his name called and once again, he ran to Eli, but Eli had not called. A third time it happened. This time it dawned upon Eli what was happening. He perceived that the Lord was calling Samuel, so he instructed the boy how to respond.

Scripture tells us "the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' " This time Samuel answered as Eli had instructed and said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." Having gotten his attention, the Lord revealed some surprising things about his future.

It should be clear that Samuel did not come to that calling on his own. He had to be aware of the hopes toward which his parents had in giving him to serve the Lord. And he was under the constant influence of Eli, so Samuel could not help but know about God. Nevertheless, there is a difference between knowing about and knowing. Knowing about God is secondary based on someone else's knowledge or experience, whereas knowing God comes from one's first-hand knowledge, experience, and relationship. One person's experience shared can become the preparation for another's direct experience and relationship. That can be the powerful effect of our own faith when we share it with another. We have good reason to surmise that is what happened to Eli and young Samuel. Eli's influence upon the boy at a very receptive time in his life brought him to the point at which the impact of God directly upon Samuel would not fade away but be a continuing force throughout his life. Samuel passed the threshold from knowing about God, to the personal relationship of knowing.

Eli's part in all this was to bring Samuel to the point of readiness, and then to instruct him in the way to respond to the Lord's call. He helped to complete God's revelatory act to Samuel, for without Samuel's response there would have been no relationship. God may call us, but the call awaits our answer.

The story in the scripture is quick to tell us that Eli was not a perfect example. None of us are. The chief criticism of Eli was that he was unable to control his unruly and contemptuous sons. Still God calls us through the imperfect examples of people like us. But still God uses us in amazing ways and with a power that often astounds us.

We are influenced by people who may never know it, and others of whom we have no idea may in turn be patterning their life in some small way upon us. Think of those who become a part of you. Think of those who awakened your ideas, quickened your spirit and encouraged and inspired you. Perhaps for you, as for me, it was a minister who didn't think it beneath himself to sit on the floor and tell stories to children, of whom I was one. Then there was that old man who was still young enough in spirit to take a lively interest in teenage people - to talk to us and even volunteer to take a carload of us when we needed transportation for some youth event. And there was a high school principal who over the years gave up not just hours but days and weeks of his life to lead a YMCA club and often to talk to us about our concerns and the things that were going on in our lives at that age. Those kinds of

images are especially important to us when we are young, but we never get past needing someone to lead us into some new way, or the need to see an image in someone else to inspire us.

I remember a young man who used to enjoy telling how someone led him to become a part of Christ's church. "It all began by spreading fertilizer," he said. You see, this fellow and his wife moved to a new community to take a teaching job, and became acquainted with a neighbor who, he noticed, often went to his church to help with whatever project was going on there. This young fellow didn't have much interest in church at the time. But one day his new friend invited him, saying, "We could use some help on a project we have going down at the church. How about coming along?" "Sure," he said, "what are we going to do?" "Spread manure," was the reply. True to his word, this young man went along to help put in and fertilize a large lawn. Through that humble task he met some others and made new friends who took a personal interest in him. The next Sunday he and his wife were in church. It was not long before they became deeply committed followers of Jesus Christ, and an example looked up to by many others, and all because of being invited to do a humble task, and coming to see that these followers of Jesus shared something they wanted in their lives.

God calls us through one another. God leads us through people who sometimes serve as angels unaware, by simply going about doing ordinary things but with the extraordinary presence of God implicit in what they do. How wonderful that God is not off somewhere ignoring us but calls us in the common events of every day. That call comes to us in the subtle urgings we glean from things we read or see, in the beauty and wonder of creation. It comes in the simple words and lives of people who point beyond themselves to show us the way to God. What a wonderful and awesome concept it is that if we listen God can call us to our own destiny through common people like us, and by that same token can call others through us.

We've all had the experience of being put on hold. Perhaps that is where we have put the call of God in our own lives. Eli's advice to his young servant Samuel is good advice for us, to open the communication lines and listen, and say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."