

Taking the Call

1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20) | 1/14/2018

"Mr. Watson, come here -- I want to see you." Those are the famous first words ever transmitted by telephone, spoken by Alexander Graham Bell March 10, 1876, into an early telephone prototype and heard by his assistant, Thomas A. Watson, in their Boston laboratory. The proof that Watson, who was in another part of the lab, heard those words on a device at his end was that he came as summoned. Watson, we can say, was the first to "take the call."

Of course, we've been doing so ever since, and some have been memorable. In 1969, for example, astronauts Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong took a call from President Richard Nixon on the moon. On the night of June 17, 1972, Washington, D.C., police took a call from a security guard named Frank Wills, telling them he had found duct tape over a lock on a door in the Watergate complex. That call set into motion the discovery of a great political scandal that eventually led to the resignation of President Nixon.

All of this leads us to the Scripture story about the young Samuel, when he heard his name called. He took the call, but assumed the caller was the elderly priest Eli. When he went to Eli, the old man said it wasn't he who called. After this happened three times, Eli finally realized that it must be the Lord summoning the lad, so he instructed Samuel to take the call. And so began Samuel's role as a prophet of the Most High God.

One problem for *us* regarding the call of the Lord, however, is uncertainty. It is not that we're unwilling to take the call, but that we're often not sure it's our spiritual mobile that's ringing. And, even if it is, we are uncertain that the voice we're hearing is really the voice of God rather than just an idea that popped into our head out of nowhere. Consider the case of E. Stanley Jones.

He had given his life to Christ at 17. When he was 23, a college president asked him to teach at the college. The president told him, "It is the will of the student body, the will of the townspeople, the will of the faculty and we believe it is the will of God for you to teach in this college." At the same time, however, a friend wrote to him saying, "I believe it is the will of God for you to go into evangelistic work here in America." During the same period, Jones also received a letter from his denomination's mission board saying, "It is our will to send you to India." And if all of that were not enough, he suspected that God's will for him was to go as a missionary to Africa.

Jones described this as a "traffic jam of wills." In the end, after much prayer, he eventually became convinced that he should go to India, which he did, and where he ministered faithfully until his death. But at the time of the competing calls, he had no foolproof way to be sure which, if any, was God's will.

The story of young Samuel reminds us that even in times when the world around us is not tuned in, *God does speak and call*. In terms of the Bible's timeline, the period when Eli and his two no-good sons were priests of the Lord, judges ruled the land, and, as the book of Judges notes: "All the people did what was right in their own eyes" (21:25). And of course, what many decided was "right in their own eyes" was nowhere close to what was right in the eyes of God. In such times, it's quite possible that even those working in the world of religion aren't all that tuned into the possibility of the Lord speaking. Notice that it wasn't until Samuel had run to Eli three times that it occurred to Eli that it was God summoning the boy.

The story also shows us that the call God wants us to take may start with bad news. What Samuel heard first, once he took the Lord's call, was a powerful word of judgment against Eli and his sons, words which it fell to young Samuel to deliver. Eventually, Samuel received better news from God, and he became a prophet to all of Israel. But all of this brings us back to the question of how we discern when God is calling. It's not like we have a photo icon that appears when we get an incoming call on our smartphones.

In that regard, a 19th-century bishop's experience is useful. John Seybert was the first bishop of the Evangelical Church. Seybert was born in 1791, entered the ministry in 1820 and became, somewhat reluctantly, a bishop in 1839 ? reluctant because he didn't think he was worthy. In those days, being a bishop of the church didn't earn you a lot of honor. It just meant you worked harder and traveled even more than the regular circuit riders.

But here's my reason for telling you about him: Before entering the ministry, Seybert was a cooper - a barrel maker - and he was making a decent living at that trade. But he thought he was feeling the call of God to preach. He wasn't sure, however, and delayed answering the call because he was uncertain whether God was truly calling him. But here's what he wrote in his journal:

I determined, if it be God's will, to labor in his vineyard with my Evangelical brethren. I should have gone sooner, had I been certain that the Lord wanted me to go. However, I had no rest at my cooperage, and concluded that the only way to get into the clear concerning this matter, was *to make an effort*. If the Lord blesses my labor with the awakening and conversion of sinners, and the edification and encouragement of saints, I determined I would serve him in this way with all my ability, wherever I might have to go, whatever crosses I might have to bear, and however long the task might last.

This journal entry describes what we might call the "Seybert method," a way of determining if it's God on the line. Seybert wasn't sure, and so he finally decided to make a beginning in the direction that seemed right. He felt that if that wasn't God's will, he would soon find out by making a start. "If the Lord blesses my labor ..." Seybert wrote. Sometimes that's the only way we can determine the right thing to do - make a start!

Starting is always a sign of hope. Making a beginning is a statement of belief in -- or at least hope for -- a good outcome. And when we sense God calling us to make a beginning, at whatever that may be, it's important not to let discouragers or opponents or distractions turn us away.

Of course, we should not understate the importance of finishing what we start. Jesus said, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). Nonetheless, nothing ever gets finished that doesn't get started.

And one more thing. When we make a start at something to which we suspect God might be calling us, we are doing a godlike thing. God calls and we can "Decline" the call or "Accept" the call. Let's tap "Accept" and see what God has to say.

God takes this kind of initiative. If God didn't, the created world and all that's in it would not exist. The Bible opens with God himself making a start: "In the beginning, God created ..." (Genesis 1:1). And in the book that closes the Bible, Revelation, a voice from the throne of God says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (Revelation 21:6). This is the testimony of God who is the beginning, center and end of all creation. God the Alpha and God the Omega is a God who is present with us everywhere and at all times. When we begin what he calls us to, he is with us.

What is waiting for a start in your life? Is there anything about which you wonder if it could be God giving you a nudge? Have you tested it? Is it possible he is calling you to get training for something? To start something? To begin the walk of faith? Are there discouragers or opponents or distractions that try to prevent your starting? The Bible suggests that sometimes you have to make a start anyway to find out what should be finished. Sometimes, we won't know until we begin.

Like Mr. Watson and like Samuel, the call you hear may be your name, followed by "I have something for you to do."

Pastor Keith