

God calling, are you listening?  
The Rev. Mark D. Wilkinson, Rector  
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church  
Virginia Beach VA 23452  
[www.aidanvbva.net](http://www.aidanvbva.net)  
Epiphany 2

Some Sundays I look at the lectionary readings and wonder what am I supposed to preach on since the passages are so challenging. Today I'm blessed with multiple wonderful scriptures. The Call of Samuel, a favorite of mine, Psalm 139 also my favorite psalm and the calling of the first disciples. All of our readings today are about that deep relationship between God and us. Yes us, not just prophets and disciples, but with little old you and me.

Both the gospel and the Samuel stories are about God extending a call to follow and the response of the people called. Now many people today just blow these off thinking something along the lines of "Well sure this is the great prophet Samuel or one of the 12 disciples. I'm not like them, I'm not that good or not worthy of this kind of call." Nothing my friends could be further from the truth. Samuel the longed for child of Hannah who is born in response to Hannah's and Eli's prayers is just an ordinary young man who has grown up in the temple. The disciples were all fishermen, tax collectors and other common people. The difference is that they all responded to God's call with a yes.

In the Samuel story the passage says that the word of the Lord was rare, visions were not widespread. We could say that about today's world as well. However that does not mean that God is not present with us in the mess, stress and conflict in today's world. Ignatius teaches that when God seems most distant is when we are most likely to have an encounter with God.

I am about do a new thing, something that will make the ears of all Israel tingle. Neither Samuel nor Eli knows what is going to happen. Neither of them realizes that the message from God is all about a total changing of the guard if you will. It is the end of Eli's time as a priest as well as his corrupt sons. Eli is old, the light has almost gone out in him, but there is just enough of the old Eli left to guide the young Samuel. Eli's name means "my God" and Samuel's name means "God has heard" Sam-u-el.

God is always present always calling. The big problem is most of the time we aren't listening or we don't know how to listen or for what to listen. Even when we are in trouble and seeking God's help, and God is there, we are quick to tell God what we think we need. However, we tend to be slow to listen to what God has to say. We ask and then too often end the conversation. That is the real challenge for us.

A critical piece to listening to God is played out in this story. Eli on the third try from God finally tells Samuel to listen for finally he realizes it is God speaking. We rarely get to hear and/or understand God speaking to us without the help of others. Discernment is best done with help. This is where a spiritual director or someone trained in direction

can help. I was talking with someone just the other day about how having another person present to help discern is important especially when the decision is about something of importance.

The other thing about listening to God is I have found many people are afraid of what God is going to tell them or ask of them. A call from God is always an invitation, never a command. We always have a choice. Sometimes we may run from that choice several times especially if it is something that challenges us. What I have found though is that God never really shuts the door on that invitation. Oh we can wait too long and then something happens that makes it impossible to follow that specific. However God does not withdraw the call. How we choose to respond is totally our choice. Accepting the call is part of our own free will.

I was preparing for our Lenten series and watching a wonderful series of videos prepared by The Rt. Rev. Andy Doyle, the bishop of the Diocese of Texas. This is a series about the challenges of the church today and fits very well with where our Mission and Vision plan is heading. I will offer it the 6 Sunday's of Lent as an evening program and I hope a large number of you will join me. More on that later, but start thinking about being a part of this important work in responding to God's call to you as an individual and God's call to our parish.

In one of the segments Bishop Doyle talks about discernment and call and gave me a really interesting insight I want to share with all of you. Bishop Doyle said: "When I was going through the process to discern if I was called to be a bishop my spiritual director said, "Andy, God is not calling you to be a bishop. God is calling you to say yes to the process of discovering what God intends for your life." Sometimes we get so far ahead that we think we need to say yes or no to that. God is not going to reveal the highs and the lows of the journey that lies before you, because you probably would never say yes. The process is to get you to say yes and then discover what this opportunity brings."

This is part of the concept that we are co-creators with God of our lives and our world. This is very different from the idea that many have that God has a plan laid out for us. In an old lecture by The Rev. Martin Smith he says that many want a peek in the holy file cabinet to see what is in their folder. However they would be disappointed since the file stops at today. Listening to God is about trusting God to be a partner in our life.

Underlying all of this theology about God's call to us is what we read in our psalm for today. Psalm 139 is all about the incredible intimate and immanent relationship that God has with each and every one of us. This is not the image of God on a throne in heaven with his finger on the smite button. Rather it is one of tender care, presence and the knowledge that God knows us from the time we are knit together in our mother's womb. You can't get any more immanent than that. That relationship is there regardless of denomination or faith. It underlies the theology of our collect for Purity that the priest says at the beginning of every service. "Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid:"

Really knowing this is critical because we cannot and will not hear God's call if we are afraid of God. God knows everything about us; the good, the bad and the ugly. Yet God loves us just as we are and that is grace.

What is unfortunate is that so few people actually believe in the image of God that is depicted in Psalm 139! Nobody is outside of the love of God regardless of race, religion, or nationality. Every person on this planet is loved by God. Every person on this planet is a child of God. Whether we all accept that is our problem and our challenge. If we really believed and led our lives believing that we are all created in the image and likeness of God and are all beloved of God then I believe the world would be a much better place. Then we would live into the promises we make in the Baptismal Covenant that calls on us to love our neighbor and respect the dignity of every human being.

So someone will ask, "this is all fine and wonderful Mark, but I'm not a disciple or a prophet. How do I learn to listen to God." Well that's both easy and hard. The work on our part is to learn to make ourselves available to God, to learn to listen to God. That would be the pesky thing we call prayer and something the Apostle Paul calls us to do without ceasing. As we approach Lent in less than a month I urge you to consider some sort of prayer discipline for Lent that will help you experience God's loving presence. Over the next few weeks and into Lent I will be putting together resources that will help. Stay tuned there is more to come.

You can make a start though by sitting with today's psalm, reading it slowly and listening for a word or a phrase that jumps out at you. Just sit for 20 minutes with that word, repeat it like a mantra and see what happens. If you have never tried this before, be patient. It will probably take several attempts before you experience anything other than prayer mosquitos, those thoughts that buzz around your head when you try to sit quietly. Above all else remember that God knows and loves you more than you can ever know.