



1 Samuel 3:1-10 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision. ² At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. ³ The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. ⁴ Then the LORD called Samuel, and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵ and ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. ⁶ And the LORD called again, "Samuel!" and Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." ⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸ And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹ Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. ¹⁰ And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant hears."

This has always been one of my favorite accounts in Scripture, ever since I was a small child, due in no small part to the fact that when I first heard this story in Sunday School all those years ago, I was very aware of the fact that I shared a first name with the protagonist. And so, it was pretty easy for me to picture myself in young Samuel's shoes, asleep in the Temple, God calling me out by name, and me following in the prophet's footsteps. And I distinctly remember thinking, "If I'm ever in that situation, I'm going to know to answer right away, ***'Speak, for your servant hears.'***"

I must confess, I may have been missing the lesson in this account since I was so laser-focused on me answering the right way. I think I was missing the point because Samuel is *not* the protagonist in the text before us this morning. He's *not* the main actor, for that would be God. God is the one who knows Samuel when Samuel doesn't know Him, God is the one who calls Him, God is the one who has the message. Samuel had a good reply which we should take note of, but it was only a good reply **BECAUSE** of the one to whom he was replying. Let's keep that idea in mind as we consider the theme:

Our "Here I Am's," are rooted in God's "Here I AM"

As we read through the text, you might have taken note of the dreadful state of the land of Israel in Samuel's early days. From the second half of the first verse, we read, ***"The word of the LORD was rare in those days."*** It was a dark time in Israel's history. If you recall from your Old Testament studies, Samuel is the one who, when he grows older, will anoint the first king of Israel, King Saul. He's also the one, for that matter, who then anointed the second king of Israel, the great King David himself. But right now, Samuel is just a young boy. And up until this point in Israel's history, Israel had been led by judges—don't think like courtroom judges, but more like military and political chieftans—whom God would send to save Israel from whatever their latest mess was. The days of the judges were not a bright spot in Israel's history.

In the book of Judges, chapter 2, the Lord paints us a picture of what those days were like: the people would start serving the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the false gods that were prevalent among the surrounding nations, and the Lord would respond to their faithlessness by allowing them to be conquered by the surrounding enemies. The people would cry out for mercy to God, God would send such a judge and help them to defeat Israel's enemies, and the people would turn back to God for a time. What would happen next? ***"Whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them."*** (Judges 2:19) It was a cyclical pattern, the people constantly returning to their own folly. The final verse of the entire book on that time period says this: ***"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."*** (Judges 21:25)

Even the priest whom Samuel served under—Eli—his sons Hophni and Phineas, they were among the worst of the lot. They served in the tabernacle of the Lord and stole the people's sacrifices away from the Lord in order to eat them. They took the women who came to the temple for worship and seduced them. Their father rebuked them, and they couldn't care less. We're also told in our text, ***"The lamp of God had not yet gone out."*** That's not an indication of time, like "it was late in the evening but not yet midnight"—the lamp of God was written into the law of Moses as a light that was to never go out! The priests and tabernacle workers were to keep it burning at all hours of the day for the Lord, yet by that statement, ***"The lamp of God had not yet gone out,"*** clearly it would go out at some point soon. General apathy toward God prevailed among the people of Israel and among the church leaders as well. But the worst part of it all: ***"The word of the LORD was rare in those days."***

It was during these dark days that Samuel was born. The people did what was right in their own eyes, the Word of the LORD was rare, yet the Word of the LORD *did* come. It came to a young boy serving in the temple of the Lord. Notice what we're told about that boy in verse 7, ***"Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him."*** That's not to say that Samuel was an unbeliever at this point, we don't have any reason to believe that He didn't study the writings of Moses or that his faithful mother didn't ensure his Christian instruction, or even that Eli didn't teach him God's Word, I'm sure he did. But as far as receiving direct revelation from God as Samuel would receive frequently in his later days, Samuel was totally unfamiliar.

So Samuel really doesn't know the Lord in an intimate way, but God nevertheless knows Him. When Samuel heard the Lord speak to him and didn't know who it was, at that same time Samuel was no stranger to God. God calls him by name! ***"Samuel!"*** It's just like in our Gospel reading, when Nathanael was told about Jesus, and he scoffed, ***"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"*** (John 1:46) He knew nothing about this Jesus fella, and he didn't really care to know anything about Him, just based on his assumptions. But Jesus knew who Nathanael was. ***"Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you,"*** Jesus told him. (John 1:48) The fact-of-the-matter is, God calls those who do not by nature know Him, and He calls them when they are not looking for Him. That was true of Nathanael, that was true of the other disciples as well, like the fishermen James and John and Peter and Andrew, that was true of Samuel, and it's true of you and me too.

This is always the way our relationship with the Lord works. We never know the Lord. In fact, we never are even believers in the Lord—the most basic knowing of the Lord—until the Lord initiates that

relationship with us. That's exactly what the Apostle Peter is indicating in his first epistle, **"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."** (1 Peter 2:9) For us, it was deep darkness as well, just like for the people of Israel at that time. Our natural inclination is to remain enemies of God and continue dwelling in the darkness of our sin and unbelief. Yet even so, the Lord has always known each one of us so very intimately. From all eternity God knew what Samuel would grow up to be. Before Samuel was conceived in his mother's womb, before she was even praying for the child, God knew that He would use Samuel in very important ways to lead God's people for decades and decades in this pivotal period in Israel's history.

And that's the general truth also for God's relationship with every single one of us. He knows us intimately, and He certainly knew each of us intimately before we knew Him *at all*. The pre-service devotion Psalm in today's bulletin is one of my favorite Psalms, and the verses which follow the ones in the bulletin proclaim this same truth, **"You formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. . . . Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them."** (Ps. 139:13, 16) He knew us before we were even conscious of ourselves, and He knew Samuel. He comes to Samuel and He calls, and He calls again, and He calls a third time, and finally Eli understands what's going on.

Eli says, go lie down, and if He calls you, you shall say, **"Speak, LORD, for your servant hears."** And Samuel does so, and it's a great response. But before we take notice of Samuel's appropriate reply, we ought to notice first of all that the Lord is the one who initiates the conversation. The Lord has initiated by great persistence again and again and again this intimate relationship with Samuel. Samuel says, **"Here I am. . . . Speak, for your servant hears."** It's a great reply, but only because God was the one to first announce to Samuel that He was there. Thanks be to the same God who has initiated the conversation with each one of us. Thanks be to the same God who has declared to each of us, "Here I AM." Even before we were looking for Him, He announced His presence in the waters of our baptism, cleansing us from our sin. He has announced His presence in the Lord's Supper, as He declares, "This is my body, this is my blood." And He has announced His presence among us this morning, **"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."** (Matthew 18:20) His presence in all of these is for the same purpose—to call us out of our deep darkness. To announce to us that our sins, though many, are forgiven. To declare that He has adopted us into His family and delivered us from darkness and death.

And so, just like He did to the disciples in our reading, just like He has done with Samuel, so He does for us. He calls out to us to follow Him. And we reply, **"Here I am. . . . Speak, for your servant hears."** Or is that the way we reply? One of my teachers from grade school shared a memory of hers with me from many years ago, it was of a young second grade Samuel, and I'm talking about myself here. I don't remember this, but apparently we were working on an art project, and my classmate Gretchen asked me if I wanted help finishing my project. My reply, apparently, was, "Let me see yours first." We don't like to get ourselves into things before we know exactly what we can expect. And so, in our conversations with God, rather than saying, **"Speak, for your servant hears,"** usually we're saying,

“Listen, Lord, for your servant is speaking.” We pray and we decide and we demand exactly how we want things to go, and we want the Lord to follow suit.

What a far cry that is from Samuel’s response, ***“Here I am. . . Speak, for your servant hears.”*** It’s as if Samuel is saying, *“I don’t know what is coming or what you will require of me; but whatever it is, I want to listen to you and to follow you.”* That hands-off type of approach—a total and complete trust—that doesn’t come naturally for us, not at all. We want to be in complete control of our own destinies, we want to know what tomorrow will bring before we’re even there. Nevertheless, the Lord calls us to sacrifice our illusion of control and simply to follow him. It would be foolish to do so with anyone else, but with the Lord we have good reason.

For as we consider our “Here I am’s,” let’s also consider when the opposite was said of God. That was that Sunday morning in the spring many years ago, when the women went to the tomb to embalm the body of their Lord. And finding the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, they encountered the angels who announced, ***“He is not here, but has risen.”*** (Luke 24:6) There’s the reason why we can follow God blindly, not knowing what will come next but trusting in the Lord to lead us. Christ’s resurrection gives us our assurance. After all, the Apostle Paul wrote in his epistle, ***“If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”*** (1 Corinthians 5:17) If Christ had not been raised, we would be fools to respond to God’s call like Samuel did.

And so, thanks be to God that Christ has been raised. We are not still in our sins. When we were blissfully ignorant of God, the Lord knew all about us. He knew our sins, He knew our shame, and He took it all away. He set our salvation as His end goal, and keeping His eyes focused on that, He endured the cross and its shame. (cf. Hebrews 12:2) When we were not looking for Him, He announced, “Here I AM,” and He brought us into His presence as His holy people. And the result is that now we can follow Him.

We can follow Him. We can say, *“Lord, here I am. . . Speak, for your servant hears,”* because we already know what the Lord’s will is for us. Whatever He has in store for us next, we know that it will work together for our good, namely, for our salvation. (cf. Romans 8:28) ***“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”*** (Jeremiah 29:11) Such is the Lord’s call to each of us. He calls us out of darkness, He calls us to live in peace with Him and our neighbors through His Son. What a glorious calling.

We can respond, *“Here I am. . . Speak, for your servant hears,”* all because God is the main protagonist in our stories as well. God is the one who knew us when we didn’t know Him, God is the one who calls us, God is the one who has this wonderful message. May the Holy Spirit work in our hearts so that when God speaks through His Word, we really listen. For it is in that Word where we find true hope and true life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7)
Amen.

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