

What Call Looks Like

1 Samuel 3:1-10
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Have you ever heard the conversion and call story of St. Francis of Assisi? The one-and-the-same St. Francis after which the hospital on the north side of town is named? The one whose statue can be found in nearly every yard in Santa Fe — always hand out, always with a bird lighting on his palm?

St. Francis was not born St. Francis. He was born as Giovanni (or John) to a wealthy cloth merchant in Assisi, Italy, but he soon gained the nickname Francesco because of his father's lucrative trading links with France.

As a young man, Francis was not particularly religious, preferring instead the night life of drinking, singing, and otherwise carousing with the other young men of the city. A good party was his top priority in life — not all that different sounding than our stereotypical view of a modern day trust-fund baby.

Francis didn't want to follow his father into the cloth trade. He wanted to be a knight. He wanted to be a protector of people, to rescue the damsel in distress, to be a hero. So he joined the forces of Assisi in a skirmish against a neighboring city. His side was completely wiped out, but he was captured and kept alive because he was valuable. He had a rich father. Would't his father pay handsomely for his son's freedom?

Ultimately, his father did pay the ransom for his freedom. But before he was freed, Francis spent an entire year in that prison — and he came home a profoundly changed person. Think about it. Before this incident, Francis was exceedingly popular, a great musician and artist, liked by everyone — the life of the party. And then he was thrown down into this hole and left to rot for a year.

When he came out and returned home, he was completely disillusioned with his father's wealth, with the life of comfort, with the frivolity of a life spent partying. He tried to reenter that world, but it just never fit again. There had to be more to life than jockeying for power and gaining wealth and pursuing pleasure.

Slowly it began to dawn on Francis that God was beckoning him: "Come, Francis. Follow me."

From that point, Francis' life took a dramatic turn toward a chosen life of poverty. Famously, he even stripped naked in the midst of legal proceedings as a way of renouncing his father's wealth by symbolically stripping himself of the very clothes that had made his father wealthy.

And thus began the founding of the Franciscan Order — the order of Catholic priests set apart by their vow of poverty and commitment to living a simple life.

It's a great story, because of the radical nature of his conversion and call. I mean, can you imagine Paris Hilton or Kim Kardashian renouncing their families' wealth and taking on the vow of poverty in order to live more like Jesus?

And we clergy particularly love this story, because if God can do that with a wayward party-animal like Francis, imagine what God can do with me — a *willing* participant!

There's maybe no topic clergy love more than the topic of "call," of God's call on our lives. If you were to spend a single day wandering the halls of a seminary, I bet you would overhear no less than a dozen conversations about call on any given day.

"What do you think you're being *called* to?"

"I feel *called* to get my Ph.D. and teach... specifically, in an Ivy League seminary."

"Really? I feel *called* to social justice ministries — ministries that let me feed and house hungry people."

"I feel *called* to preach — but preferably to a congregation that already agrees with everything I have to say."

"I feel *called* to campus ministry... to hospital chaplaincy... to military chaplaincy..."

"I don't know what I feel *called* to..."

The word, *call*, just reverberates off the walls of seminary hallways — but I rarely hear anyone talk about call in a way that's compelling to me. It usually seems to lack a sense of clear conviction. One colleague in my seminary said he was there because his grandmother had told him his whole life that he would make a great pastor one day. I was glad he had such a close relationship with his grandmother, but that's not exactly the kind of conviction that inspires confidence.

I think that's why we need to keep holding on to stories like that of St. Francis; like that of Billy Graham; like that of Mother Teresa; like that of Martin Luther King, Jr. It's why — every once in a while — we need to remember the stories of those like Samuel.

Samuel was still just a boy at this point. He had been a miracle baby for Hannah, who prayed that if God would grant her a child, she would dedicate the child to the LORD. Soon enough she was pregnant with Samuel. God had kept God's promise, so she would keep her's. She brought the boy to the prophet Eli as soon as he was weaned. And so, the boy grew up ministering to the LORD under Eli.

We're told that the word of the LORD grew rare in those days; that visions were not widespread (1 Sam. 3:1). It's no coincidence that Eli's eyesight had begun to grow dim. It's symbolic. Eli was the one responsible for seeing visions from God, but he had grown

apathetic and too comfortable in his role. And, thus, his physical vision had not only grown dim, but so had his spiritual vision. It was time, it seemed, to call his successor.

So one night, Samuel was tending to the lamp of God, which was supposed to burn before the Ark all through the night. It was the kind of job you'd give an intern — not terribly difficult, but not fun either, because it meant you had to stay awake all through the night. It was a thankless task, but one that needed to be done. So, Samuel was tending to the lamp, waiting for morning, trying not to drift off to sleep when he heard a voice call his name: "Samuel! Samuel!"

The boy assumed it was old, blind Eli and ran to him saying, "Here I am! Here I am! What is it? Do you need a glass of water?"

Eli said, "What are you talking about? I didn't call for you. Go back to bed."

Samuel went back to tending the lamp, and soon enough, began to drift off a second time. The LORD called, "Samuel!" Again, Samuel ran to Eli saying, "Here I am!" And again, Eli said, "I didn't call for you. You must be having some incredibly vivid dreams. Go back to bed."

A third time it a voice called and Samuel came running to Eli, but this time Eli had begun to grasp what was happening. He had been Samuel once — young and inexperienced in discerning the voice of God. It wasn't just a vivid dream or the overactive imagination of a young child. God was speaking to Samuel — calling Samuel — and Samuel didn't realize what was unfolding.

This time Eli said, "Go, lie down; and if the voice calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.' (1 Sam. 3:9).

Again, the voice called him by name, "Samuel! Sam-u-el! (which literally means "God has heard.")

This time, Samuel did not run for the old priest, Eli. He sat right where he was, and he said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." And that is how Samuel was called by God.

Ministers love this story, too — maybe even more than St. Francis' story. It's easy to see why, what with Samuel being called to serve God ever since he was a young child. We clergy like to see ourselves in Samuel.

In fact, the long-time Old Testament professor Don Juel points to this passage as his favorite passage in all of scripture, because when he was just a boy he read this story, and it gripped him. He sat his Bible down, went to his parents and asked, "When is God going to call me?" And he knew from that moment on that he was going to be a pastor.

It's a powerful image. And when you hear stories like that, it's easy to see how we clergy gravitate toward it. But, unfortunately, all too often this passage is preached as if

some are called into service of God and some are not; as if some of us are called to be the pastors and preachers and chaplains and missionaries — who do the *real* work of the kingdom, while the rest of you are just church members who volunteer a few hours a week for the kingdom; as if clergy are of a higher order than the everyday saint.

Does sound right to you? Or does it sound like it's teetering on the edge of idolatry?

Do you know we baptists have the communion table down here on the floor?

If you were to go to a Catholic Church, the communion table would most likely be elevated and behind a barrier, so as to prevent you from approaching it directly. Instead, the priest would stand between you and it — keeping you one step removed as he administered communion to you.

But in baptist life, we have put the communion table on the floor — not elevated, not behind a barrier — but on the floor. We have put it *on the same level as the people* as a symbolic way of saying that you do not need a priest to stand between you and God. You don't need a mediator. We are all on the same level.

Our historic belief is in “the priesthood of *every* believer.” You don’t need to confess your sins to God through me; you can pray to God directly. You are a priest in your own right. Sometimes we call this principle “soul freedom,” because it holds that each person has both the freedom and the responsibility to relate to God directly.

But “the priesthood of every believer” carries with it another responsibility. If every person is a priest, could it also mean that *ALL* are called? Maybe not called into full-time, vocational ministry —we need a larger imagination than that — but still *fully* called into service of God’s kingdom?

I think that we are.

I think, the question isn’t, “Are we called?” The *real* question is, “How do we know what that call is?”

Would we dare say that we have heard the voice of God call our name? Maybe. Or maybe we would point to the encouragement of trusted voices and mentors. Maybe the words of Jesus have clarified how we understand our call. Or maybe our own life experiences or our unique talents have shaped our sense of call.

Frederick Buechner has said, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Has that rung true in your life — or does it seem a little to pie-in-the-sky to be true to you?

How in the world can we ever know with any confidence that we are right where we are supposed to be, doing exactly what we are supposed to be doing?

My experience is that it's like trying to hit a moving target. That's because our lives are not static, but dynamic — always moving, always changing — and so I'm willing to bet that our sense of call will be different throughout different seasons of our lives.

When I was in junior college, Arlano Funderburk became my mentor. When I met him, Arlano had already been doing campus ministry on that campus for 30 years. He was on the downward slope of his ministry.

I remember sitting with him one day after some event we'd hosted, chatting about life and purpose. Here I was, a naive 23-year old — absolutely unsure of what to do with my life, unsure of my identity, unsure of pretty much everything — sitting next to someone who had devoted his life to serving others.

As we sat chatting, he started to reflect on the reality that he knew that his years were numbered, that his public ministry was winding down, that he had less time left on earth than he had already spent. And he looked at me and he said, "Dan, I don't know what exactly I have to give, but I do know that I want the time I have left to matter for God's kingdom."

Maybe *that's* the question we ought to be asking ourselves more often. Not, "Is my deep gladness meeting the world's deep need?" but, "Does what I'm doing matter for God's kingdom?"

The truth is, our God is a utilitarian God, using even broken vessels like us to carry water. This is how God works. From Genesis to Revelation, God partners with people to work redemption in the world — sometimes calling hundred-year old couples to bear children, sometimes calling devious tricksters, sometimes calling little boys to face giants and young girls to bear the Messiah, and sometimes calling children to replace the experienced, wise priests.

God works through us, calling us into service — not to be salvation for others, but to play a part. We cannot be everything for God's kingdom. But we can be *something*.

It was several years ago on a Tuesday morning. I was up the street at Ecumenical Social Ministries taking care of a couple of business items, and happened to step out of the building as the director, Ann Lantz, was pulling up. If you don't know about ESM, it was a partner ministry of ours that served those with the greatest need in our community. They provided food to the hungry, clothes to the naked, and showers to the stinky — among other things.

Well I was standing at the curb visiting with Ann when a group of volunteers stepped out of the building: a group of 80-something year old women. And as these women stepped out the front doors, they were laughing and carrying on — big smiles on their faces. They waved at Ann. Ann turned to me and said, "You see her? The ringleader, there in the center? Her name is Judy.

For thirty some years, Judy attended a Tuesday morning Bible study at First United Methodist Church. Last year she came to me and told me she wanted to start volunteering on Tuesdays instead. I told her that was great, but asked her what brought this on. Judy said, ‘Ann, I’ve been studying the Bible for over 30 years. I think it’s time I stopped studying the Bible and started doing what it says.’ She’s been here nearly every Tuesday morning since.”

I suspect that this is what genuine call looks like. It doesn’t always look like going to seminary and getting ordained.

More often, it looks like someone who has found it in themselves to say, “I want whatever I have left to give to matter for God’s kingdom.”

And then without pomp or circumstance, without fanfare of any sort, they start living that way.

But it almost always begins when we feel that nudging from the spirit God, and are prepared to say, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”

Amen.