



Mysterious Call: God Is Persistent

A sermon on 1 Samuel 3:1-20

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First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois

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Before Caller ID was invented the identity of the person calling you was a mystery. It could be anyone: your dad calling to check in, your neighbor calling to tell you to come get your dog, again..., or a joker wanting to know if your fridge was still running. If so, you'd better go catch it. So many exciting possibilities. It could be anyone. I wish Alexander Graham Bell had won the debate when they were figuring out how we'd answer the phone. He suggested we answer the phone with "Ahoy-hoy." How great would that be. I ring up Bill/Kent and he answers "Ahoy-hoy" and I say back "Ahoy-hoy." Answering the that way would be a lot more fun!¹ The excitement of answering the phone before Caller ID was that you didn't know who it was until you answered the phone and even then it could be confusing. You might have mistaken one person's voice for another, and thought you were talking to your teammate when really you were talking to the furnace repair person. Before Caller ID, answering the phone was an adventure, because you didn't know who was calling, and you could never be sure who it was until they identified themselves.

Samuel had hard time identifying who was calling him late one night. He was just starting to doze off when he heard a voice saying "Samuel, Samuel!" (vs 4) Surprised he got up to go see Eli. Eli was the high priest. He was also Samuel's guardian and teacher. Since it was just the two of them staying in the tabernacle it made sense that Samuel would think it was Eli shouting for him. Samuel went to Eli and said to him, "Here I am, for you called me." (vs 5) Eli, however, hadn't called him, so Eli told him to go back to bed. Samuel went back to bed, but twice more Samuel heard someone say "Samuel" and twice more he got up and went to see Eli. Eli wasn't the one hollering for him. After a time, however, he recognized that it was God calling to Samuel. He told Samuel to, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and laid down once again, still uncertain who the mystery caller was, but he was ready with an answer, however, it was not "Ahoy-hoy."

We don't always recognize God's call either. In much the same way that Samuel didn't know who was calling to him, we struggle to discern when God is calling to us. During Samuel's life it was rare to hear God. So it's no surprise that he didn't understand what was going on when God spoke. Today, it seems as though the word of God is rare too. It also seems that when God does call us it's hard to distinguish God's voice from every other voice trying to get our attention. Is God calling to us? Or, is it just our desires playing tricks on us? Things would be so much simpler if we had some sort of Caller ID for God. If we could look at a screen and know the call is important because the Caller ID reads "God is calling." That would make life much easier. There wouldn't be any guesswork or uncertainty. It would be plain as day, no mystery at all. The trouble is things don't work that way. We don't have that kind of Caller ID. No such thing exists, or does it?

Eli helped Samuel discern who was calling for him. It took Eli a little time to understand what was going on as both of them were trying to get a good-night's-sleep, but eventually he did. In a way, he acted as a Caller ID for Samuel, informing Samuel who was calling. Eli was able to discern what was going, not because he was some telephone program. Eli was able to discern it was God because God was persistent. God did not stop calling to Samuel after the first time. Or the second time. Or the third time. God loved Samuel, and was persistent, calling to him, time and time again. It was in community, with other believers, that Samuel came to understand who was calling him. That community acted as a type of Caller ID. Community is integral to the Christian faith. In community believers support one another, listen for God to speak, and discern God's call together. What a relief that must have been for Samuel to have Eli there. Samuel wasn't alone. He was in community with other believers who helped him to recognize God's voice. We mustn't forget, this point, God was persistent and continued to pursue Samuel. God did not give up on Samuel. Even when Samuel didn't understand what was going on, God continued to call him.

The church helps us recognize God's call. That is part of what Confirmation is all about. Confirmation, in some ways, works as the "God Caller ID" helping people understand who is calling for them. God might be mysterious in many ways, but God's call upon our lives is made clear through the discernment of Christian community. In Confirmation we learn that God calls to us and we respond to God's call. [This morning we get to celebrate Lauren, Maggie, and Neil's response to God's call upon their lives.] The good news is that God doesn't ring just once. God calls to us time and time again. God does not give up on us. God's loves us and is persistent.

Christian community acts as a kind of "God Caller ID" as we heard through the story of Samuel and Eli. Being in relationship with other Christians helps us discern God's call upon our lives. We, as the congregation, are part of the Confirmands Christian community, and through our baptisms and membership in the church, we have pledged to help them grow and discern God's call upon their lives. Our responsibility is to live in community and help one another discern God's will. We do this through honest conversation, and praying with one another. This week, our charge is to pray with one other person, listening to God's call upon our lives. The good news we have heard this morning is that God doesn't give up. God has called to us. God is calling to us. God will keep calling us. God loves us and is persistent.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

¹ (<https://www.npr.org/sections/krulwich/2011/02/17/133785829/a-shockingly-short-history-of-hello>)