

Macalester Plymouth

UNITED CHURCH

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Today's scripture reading is the origin story of one of our faith's super heroes. Samuel, who is just a boy in today's story, grows up to be a very important priest in the temple, a truth-teller when his people were in trouble, and he is the one who appoints the first Kings of a unified Israel. Origin stories are all the rage these days. We want to know how heroes are made, how ordinary people are called to make a difference. We are curious because we know we are called to live lives that matter, too. This is the story of the calling of Samuel.

Samuel 3:1-10

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 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. Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" [\[a\]](#) and he said, "Here I am!" 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. The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up 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." Now

Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." May these words be to us our light and our life. Thanks be to God.

It was actually Megan's Christmas present from her mom, but I couldn't resist taking a peek. I recently started reading *A Promised Land*, the new memoir by former President Barack Obama. It is a well written telling of his life and time in office. He is a great story teller, which is good, because at around 750 pages (and this is only volume one of a promised two volume series) this book will require a long-term relationship. I decided to switch to the audio book, which is still 30 hours, so I can listen to it while on my morning walks with the dogs. Read by the former president himself, I am so grateful to have the voice of a different kind of national leadership in my ear as the events of the last few weeks unfolded. And with today's scripture in mind, I was especially curious to hear the story of his call to politics.

The first part of the book is about his formative years moving from community organizer, to law professor, to Illinois state senator, to congressman, before becoming president. I listened intently as he reflected on the turning points along

this journey to see if he, like the boy Samuel, heard a voice in the darkness, calling his name, calling him to a bigger life.

A word about Samuel first. Samuel was an answer to prayer. His mother, Hannah, had long hoped for a child. She once prayed that if God gave her a child, she would dedicate the child to serve God in the temple. So, when Samuel was born, Hannah brought him to the temple, to Eli, one of the temple priests, to fulfill her promise. Samuel was about 11, according to rabbinic tradition, when one night he heard God calling his name.

To me, there are a few important things to notice about this divine encounter that suggest what it can be like to be called by God. First, God calls Samuel by name. The call is about him. It is not some kind of holy APB, an advertisement announcing new openings for people of faith. It was quiet, persistent and clearly personal. "Samuel!" The second thing to notice is that Samuel doesn't understand that it is God calling at first. Samuel thinks Eli is calling his name from the next room. I wonder what caused his confusion? Did he really think it was Eli? Did he not believe God could sound like that? Or was he afraid that it really was God and ran to Eli unsure if he was ready to answer? I wonder how often do we dismiss the possibility that God is calling us, because it doesn't sound right or we are too afraid to answer? Third, it is important to notice that Samuel would not have paid attention to God's call without Eli. It is Eli who recognizes that it is God calling and encourages the boy Samuel to simply listen. Samuel would not have heard God's call without Eli's counsel. We often need outside

encouragement to hear the call within. And so the scene is set for Samuel to finally respond to God's call saying, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Have any of you heard a voice in the night calling your name? My guess is that most of us have not. And yet, there are these profound moments that shake something free in us, opening a new possibility and nudging us towards it. A life of faith invites these moments, welcomes them, and trusts that God is at work in and through them.

Barack Obama's first call to politics came while he was in law school at Harvard. From school, he watched as Harold Washington become Chicago's first Black mayor. Obama was inspired by the things mayor Washington accomplished, but above all, "Harold gave people hope...It wasn't so much about what he did but how he made you feel. Like anything was possible. Like the world was yours to remake. For me, this planted a seed. It made me think for the first time that I wanted to someday run for public office." (p.17) This seed eventually sprouted and Obama ran for state senate in Illinois. He eventually won and served three terms in Springfield.

A second call came during the aftermath of his first failed attempt to run for Congress. Losing to Bobby Rush by 30 points stung, but it led Obama to some necessary refocusing. He thought about leaving politics all together, but some summer visits downstate, to the small towns of Illinois to visit some of his fellow senators, kept him motivated. He writes, "...what struck me most during our travels was how familiar everything felt--whether we were at a county fair or a

union hall or on the porch on someone's farm. In the way people described their families or their jobs. In their modesty and their hospitality. In their enthusiasm for high school basketball. In the food they served, the fried chicken and baked beans and Jell-O molds. In them, I heard echoes of my grandparents, my mother, Michelle's mom and dad. Same values. Same hopes and dreams. These excursions became more sporadic once my kids were born. But the simple, recurring insight they offered stayed with me. As long as the residents of my Chicago district and districts downstate remained strangers to one another, I realized, our politics would never truly change." He continues, "Ultimately, wasn't this what I was after--a politics that bridged America's racial, ethnic, and religious divides as well as the many strands of my own life? Maybe I was being unrealistic; maybe such divisions were too deeply entrenched. But no matter how hard I tried to convince myself otherwise, I couldn't shake the feeling that it was too early to give up on my deepest convictions."(p. 40-41)

After winning a seat in the US Senate, his call clarified again during a trip to Houston in the immediate aftermath of hurricane Katrina. He went with George H. W. and Barbara Bush and Bill and Hilary Clinton to the Astrodome, which, you might remember, was converted into an emergency shelter for thousands of victims. He writes, "It struck me as I moved from cot to cot that many of the people there, most of whom were Black, had been abandoned long before the hurricane--scratching out a living on the periphery without savings or insurance. I listened to their stories about lost homes and loved ones missing in the flood, about their inability to evacuate because they had no car or couldn't move an ailing parent, people no different than from those I'd worked to organize in

Chicago, no different from some of Michelle's aunts or cousins. I was reminded that no matter how my circumstances may have changed, theirs had not. The politics of the country had not. Forgotten people and forgotten voices remained everywhere, neglected by a government that often appeared blind or indifferent to their needs." (pg. 62-63)

The first part of the book also details the "Eli's" of Obama's journey, who encouraged him to keep listening to his unfolding call to public service.

Interestingly, Obama distances himself from claiming any kind of divine call to run for president. He writes, "Whatever the nature of my faith, I couldn't take refuge in the notion of God calling me to run for president. I couldn't pretend to be simply responding to some invisible pull of the universe. I couldn't claim I was indispensable to the cause of freedom and justice, or deny responsibility for the burden I'd be placing on my family." If I was his pastor, I might dig into this a bit with him. It sounds to me a lot like Samuel. He expected a divine call to sound different, to be a clear, undeniable, and well-lit path. Instead, his path was shrouded in self-doubt, uncertainty and a sober awareness of the accumulating costs to his family of his public life. What I love about the story of Samuel is the reassurance that God is at work in our confusion. And in fact, rarely do we hear the sound of our name the first time God calls it.

But what is sound? Sound is created when something vibrates. With the voice, it is the vocal cords that vibrate. Whether or not we can hear a sound depends upon the frequency of the vibration. I don't imagine God having vocal cords.

Instead, I believe God's "voice" can be "heard" whenever something around us vibrates at that unique frequency to which our hearts are tuned. I would say that Former President Obama's heart was uniquely tuned to the vibrations of discord and division in his home state of Illinois, the suffering of storm ravaged victims in Houston, and the vision of a more just and equitable country. He didn't say it, but we might say that God called his name through these experiences, through the encouragement of his peers and mentors, and through the love of his family. And, he responded by saying, "Speak, your servant is listening."

I know you are listening, too, hoping for something, anything, divine or otherwise, to clarify your path. I think this is a particularly challenging time to discern our call. Everything seems so big and feels so urgent. Everything is vibrating on all frequencies. Our hearts are overwhelmed with all that is going on. But these larger issues and movements are only part of our call. The story of Samuel suggests we keep listening for our name in the din, to keep discerning what part we uniquely can play, and keep opening to the possibilities that are only ours to embrace. We must listen with the ears of our heart for God calling our name. (Names of congregation members spoken aloud. Pause and imagine me saying your name.)

Speak, God, your servants are listening.