

A Voice in the Night
John 1:43-51

In any given week, there are hundreds of voices that call out to us and try to get our attention. Each voice makes its claim on us and asserts that what it has to say is most important. And we're left wondering to which voices we should listen. Do we listen to the voices calling us to look out for number one and satisfy our own desires, or the voices that call out for help: the voices of the troubled, the sorrowful, the hopeless, the sick and dying in our society? Do we listen to the voice that tells us we should be afraid or the one that assures us that everything will be alright?

We hear a lot of voices. Not only do we hear voices from outside of ourselves calling, but there are voices from deep within our souls. We hear the voices of self-doubt and self-condemnation waking us in the middle of the night, telling us that we are not living as we ought. We hear voices telling us that we're not worthy – not worthy to be a spouse, a parent, a friend, or perhaps that we're not worthy to be called a Christian. These voices remind us of our mistakes, our failures, our shortcomings. Then there are other voices that affirm who we are and what we do. They remind us of all the good we accomplish. Which voice is speaking the truth? To which voice should we listen?

The boy, Samuel, in our OT lesson heard a voice in the night. At the end of the day as he lay down and began to get drowsy, he suddenly heard his name spoken, breaking the silence of the night. Thinking it was the old priest, he jumped up and went to Eli's bedside. *You called me and here I am.* But Eli responded, *I didn't call you, go back to sleep.* Trying to get comfortable and fall into a peaceful slumber, he again heard the voice calling his name, and returned to Eli's side. *No son, I did not call. Go back to sleep.* And a third time Samuel heard a voice in the night and got up and went to Eli.

Like Samuel, we hear voices. But where in the midst of the voices in the night is the truth? Where is the voice of God? Samuel heard the voice not once, but three times. Each time he thought it was Eli calling him. Finally, Eli sensed that Samuel was hearing the call of another voice in the night. He had missed it the first two times because it was completely unexpected. We read in the first verse that *the word of the Lord was rare in those days and visions were not widespread.* Eli missed the significance of the voice because God had been silent for a while. Furthermore, he probably never imagined that, when God made himself heard again, it would be to a twelve-year-old boy. So, with the realization it was God speaking, Eli said to Samuel, *Go, lie down; and if he calls again, you shall say, 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.*

When the voice came again, Samuel was able to respond to the call of God. And this began a wonderful relationship between God and a young boy who was willing to believe and accept that the voice he heard was the voice of God. And throughout his life, Samuel listened to God's voice. God led him to become the last of the judges in Israel and the first in a long line of prophets who spoke to the people on God's behalf. He was also God's spokesman in anointing the first two kings of Israel.

Yes, Samuel has a prominent place in the pages of the Old Testament because he was willing to listen to the voice calling in the night and trust the God behind that voice. But what if, instead, he

had listened to another voice – the voice that said Eli was just a senile old man who was not to be taken seriously or the voice that said God would never speak to an insignificant, young boy? Samuel would have denied himself that relationship with the God who loved him and who ultimately led him to do great things for the sake of Israel.

The voice of God calls to us out of the night, as well. Amid all the other voices is the voice of God, calling us to trust and serve him. We may mistake the divine voice or confuse it with the noises of the world or the rumblings of our own emotions, but it is there, nonetheless – a patient voice that keeps speaking our names, waiting for us to respond. And it's always a risk, isn't it, to believe that it is the voice of God speaking our name?

In our gospel text for today, Nathanael doubted his friend's voice. Phillip came with an invitation: *We've found the one we've been waiting for all our lives.* But Nathanael was reluctant to believe. *You're telling me that the promised Messiah came out of that little town of Nazareth? Nothing good could ever come from there.* The only thing Phillip could do was to invite his friend to take a risk. *Come and see.* And, surprisingly, Nathanael went. Then, in that initial encounter with Jesus, Nathanael discovered not only who Jesus was – that he was truly the promised Messiah – but discovered also who he, himself was, or the person he could be by following Jesus.

What if Nathanael had not taken that risk? What if he had listened to the voice of his preconceived ideas and stereotypes? What if he would have listened to the voice of his experience telling him that nothing good could come from Nazareth? He never would have met and entered into a relationship with the one who called him by name and said, *Follow me.*

Lives, you see, are transformed when we respond to God's call and the world around us is transformed through us. But it requires listening. It requires us to mute all the other voices calling out to us and focusing on the voice that matters most – the voice calling us to rise up and venture forth to be proclaimers of the gospel in our community. This voice asks us to come and see. It beckons us to experience a renewed life of trust and service in the name of Jesus, our Lord.

Obedying this voice does involve risk. It involves taking chances. And with all those voices calling to us, it's hard to know which is the voice of God. The only way to know is to respond, to come and see, to move out and experience a new trust and a new mission. The only way is to say, *Here I am Lord; I will go Lord.*

One person not too many years ago heard a voice in the night and rose up to trust and serve. That voice asked him to trust that America could become a nation free of racism, prejudice, and oppression. It asked him to appeal to the conscience of America. To answer that voice, Martin Luther King, Jr. had to ignore many other voices: the voices that said violence was the only way, the voices that condemned his dream and smeared his integrity, the voices that said people of African descent were of an inferior race who must accept their place in society. Amid all the voices in the night, Dr. King dared to trust that it was the voice of God he heard. He dared to come and see. He dared to answer, *Here I am Lord. Speak, for your servant is listening.* And since then, our world has not been the same.

Is there hope that we might do the same thing? Is there hope that we might be able to hear God's voice amid all the noise of our world? Is there hope that we might trust and serve in new and exciting ways? Yes, there is one hope. It is found in the voice itself, the voice of our gracious God who sent his beloved Son to call us to trust and service. This is not just a voice amid all the others. This is the voice of love, and the sound of love always stands out from the voices of the night.

Just as God called Samuel and Phillip and Nathanael, God calls us. But we have to listen, and listening sometimes means putting aside our own prejudices and life experiences. We might look at our own track record and be tempted to listen to the voice within that tells us we could never accomplish anything for God or contribute to the world around us. We might listen to the voice that tells us we are too busy with other commitments. Or we may be tempted to listen to the voice that says our church is small, aging, and declining and asks, *Can anything good come out of this place?* But the truth is this: God calls us because he can use us, no matter how insignificant or decadent we might consider ourselves to be.

God's call is very personal. He calls each of us differently because we have different experiences and different stories to tell. But God issues the invitation and, in that call, lives are changed. When we respond to the voice in the night we know we are responding to One who loves and cares, One who understands and forgives, One who gives hope and puts meaning back into life. And because of that love-filled voice, we can arise to come and see, to trust and serve, to say, *Here I am, send me. Amen.*