

Epiphany 2, Year B, 01-18-15
All Saints Episcopal Church

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.'"

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

A long, long time ago, I realized that I wanted to be a priest, so I set about the process of going to seminary. No matter who I talked to in that process, I was always asked this question, "How do you know you are called to be a priest?" The question always made me feel like the person or committee asking was judging my answer and my answer always felt inadequate. The only time I did NOT feel judged was when I told my father - himself a priest - that I wanted to be a priest; his response to me was, "Well, I was wondering when you were going to figure that out!"

It's hard to know when God is speaking to you, isn't it? Even Samuel didn't know it was God who was talking to him, and he had been living in the Temple since he was very, very young, having been dedicated to the Lord by his mother, Hannah. He slept in the room where the Ark of the Covenant was kept - the place where people in those days thought God lived. Imagine how scary it must have been for Samuel...alone in the Holy of Holies...in the dark...on a cold, hard floor...maybe not really sure why he was there in the first place.

He hears a voice. He thinks it's Eli calling him.

But even Eli, his mentor and a seasoned prophet, didn't know what was going on. And God called out to Samuel three times before Eli figured out whose voice it was.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus called Philip to follow him. Philip went to get Nathanael to go with him. But Nathanael said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said, "Come and see." Philip had gotten his call directly from the horse's mouth, so to speak, but Nathanael was, at first, hesitant to say yes until he had a direct experience of Jesus for himself.

Yes, it is hard to know when we are hearing God's voice and when we are not. Some of us may have heard God's voice clearly and without a doubt. Some of us have not. Some of us have never thought about it at all.

We talk here a lot about being called; that our call as the people of God is to care for those who are the least of us, to offer hope and healing and love to the world, and to make the world a place of justice and peace. That is a noble call for us all.

But we don't often talk about individual calls. So how do we know God is calling us? And how do we know what we are being called to do or who we are called to be? Does God talk to each of us as individuals?

There are lots of words written about these questions, as you might imagine -- some of them more interesting than others. But there is no one exact answer to any of them! It is up to us to pay attention - to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening!" and to listen with our hearts and our heads and our ears - in order to recognize what we are called to be or to do.

Anne Lamott is a novelist and non-fiction writer who writes about her life in books and on a blog. In a recent blog, she wrote about how God had spoken to her; I thought it was worth looking at part of what she wrote:

I am reluctant to say I heard directly from God the other day...

But I did hear from God. So sue me.

I rarely do--almost never in fact, directly, which is one of my real problems with the Divine It. Like it would be so much skin off Its nose, to slip us notes or whisper in our tiny shell-shaped ears: "Get rid of this guy." "Yes, take the [darn] job." "Keep the sweater."

But I did hear the other day, in the least likely of places--my church. I had been nuts since the first of the year, in my disease of toxic Thinking; obsessed, shamed and controlling. I could have answered most of the 20 questions on the Addictive Thinking Questionnaire: Do you ever lie about your thinking? Have you ever missed work as a result of your thinking? Do you ever think alone?

There were reasons--the anxieties of December, a month which, if I were God's West Coast Rep, I would cancel; the stress of [my] book tour, 14 nights, 14 airports, 42 fattening meals; all the losses in my family's life this fall; a new relationship that fell apart. You know the drill. It's called Real Life. It's hard here. It just is.

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Then she goes on to explain how, in an effort to relieve all this stress, she had decided she needed a neck lift! She could justify it because of growing up in California, in the sun, in the age of tin foil reflectors and baby oil, and because her job requires her to make public appearances, sometimes under bright lights. But she was conflicted about it because she is a feminist and 'a follower of Jesus, especially His pleas that we take care of His poor.'

Then she was ashamed for thinking about it so much. She says,

Obviously, I needed to fix this situation, which--left to my own devices--is my battle cry.

But I'm NOT left to my own devices. I believe in two things, God and my friends. They are both Love, and they stay close to me no matter how awful I am being.

Both have very low standards, which is all I have going for myself.

So I tried to heal myself of my obsessed and ashamed mind with my obsessive and ashamed mind. You know how well that works. Then I found myself in church.....

But they say that when all else fails to follow instructions, so, it being church and all, I did what they say. It was silent confession. My usual confession is, "Look--I think we both know what we have on our hands here." But last Sunday, I said in silence that I was hating on myself for wanting a mini neck lift, and for being totally obsessed, in the face of my community's and world's profound suffering.

And in the silence, I heard a voice say, gently, "It's okay."

It was shocking. I opened my eyes to the sound, but all 25 congregants had their eyes closed. I gaped. It's okay? Wait--what?

And that was it--that it is okay to want a necklift, and it is okay to be screwed up and human and sad and cuckoo.

I started laughing to myself. This literally had not occurred to me.

Grace as spiritual WD-40, as buoyancy, as vitamins, 2nd winds.

This particular blog post has had, to date, almost 1500 comments. Many of them are thanking her for her thoughts, her words, her humor. But a surprising number are from readers relating their own experiences of God speaking to them. Some of them described hearing an actual voice, some a feeling, some had conversations with God, some found God to have a sense of humor. In general, no matter how the people interpreted their encounters with God, what they 'heard' was God's affirmation of them, of God's love and encouragement of them as the people they were created to be.

The point of all of this is that we can figure out what God is saying to us if we pay attention. It is an art, as Jim says. It takes time and work to develop the skill, but it is something each of us can do.

Tomorrow we celebrate the life and witness of Martin Luther King, Jr. Fifty years ago he told us about his dream that one day all people would be equal and that no one would be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. Fifty years is a long time. Sadly, there is still a lot of work to be done.

We are the ones who are called to do the work. But can we all be Martin Luther King? Of course not. Our call is not to be him. Our call is to be ourselves as best we can be.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams once said that when he gets to heaven, God won't ask him why he wasn't Martin Luther King; God will ask him why he wasn't Rowan Williams.

If that is the case, then there's a good chance that when I show up at the pearly gates, God will ask me, "Why weren't you Mary Robert?"

I may not lead a civil rights movement, but I can help one person find a job. I may not win a Nobel Peace Prize, but I can live peacefully with my neighbor. I probably won't give a speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, but I can do my best interpreting today's lectionary.

Martin Luther King didn't set out to be a great American hero. He set out to answer God's call one day at a time. We, too, should begin with the basics - loving God, loving our neighbor, loving ourselves.

You and I will probably never spend the night in a Birmingham jail, organize a bus boycott, or integrate a school system, but we can write, paint, sing, teach, preach, heal, count, plan, create, invent, work, laugh and pray - be who we are created to be in order to care for each other.

One last thing: a poem called 'God Says Yes to Me' by Kaylin Haught

I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic
and she said yes

I asked her if it was okay to be short
and she said it sure is

I asked her if I could wear nail polish
or not wear nail polish
and she said honey

she calls me that sometimes
she said you can do just exactly
what you want to

Thanks God I said
And is it even okay if I dont paragraph
my letters

Sweetcakes God said
who knows where she picked that up
what I'm telling you is
Yes Yes Yes

God says Yes to all of us. Thanks be to God!