

The Call of God

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on First Samuel 3:1-20

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Six or seven years ago I was still in graduate school when I presented a paper at a Philosophy Conference in North Carolina. I was really excited about being able to give a talk at this conference, because it had all kinds of big names and famous people in the field of Philosophy, but then, before long I became discouraged and disappointed because no one showed up for my talk. Well, I shouldn't say that no one showed up. Two people were there, but then one of them got up and walked out because she realized she was in the wrong place, so I was left with one person at my talk. Now, what happened? What went wrong? Well, the title of my talk was "The Case for David Brink's Motivational Judgment Externalism." So, you tell me what went wrong. That doesn't sound too exciting does it?

I have always struggled to come up with catchy titles for my sermons and papers and I am a little jealous of those who come up with such titles. One time I listened to a sermon titled "Does God Dial Wrong Numbers?" Isn't that just a wonderful title? Now as you can probably guess, the sermon of course asked the question does God ever call anyone by mistake. And the preacher boldly stated that in her judgment the answer is no, God never calls anyone by mistake and if you are called by God, no matter what doubts you may have about your call, God surely dialed the right number.

Well, I would agree that God does not call people by mistake. But before we ever get to the question of whether God dials wrong numbers, I know that some people want to know if God really calls anyone at all. For think about this if you would. If someone were to come to you and tell you they were called by God to be this or to do that, would you look at that person

differently? Would you wonder if they are the kind of person who would also tell you that they see UFOs, that they have seen Bigfoot, or the Lochness Monster? Would you consider that person a little flaky? For suppose someone comes up to you and says “What I heard when God called me was an audible voice, a voice in the same way that I am speaking to you right now.” Well, you wouldn’t likely think that person really did hear the voice of God, instead you would probably think that person had some sort of mental illness, like someone who is schizophrenic and hears voices. But on the other hand suppose they said, “No, no you’ve got this all wrong, I didn’t hear an audible voice, all I heard was a voice in my imagination.” Well, I don’t know that that would be any better. For then you might say, how do you know that what you heard wasn’t just your imagination? How do you know it was the Lord?

I have to admit to you, I was almost grown before I had ever even heard the idea that someone might be called by God. At that time I decided that for many years I myself had been called to the ministry, but for many years I didn’t know what a call was or think in those terms. Like the young boy Samuel in our lesson for today who hears a voice but thinks it is the voice of his father, I too heard a voice inside myself but it took me years to know it was the voice of God. Now, when I was a kid I of course went to church and I said my prayers and I believed that God made the heavens and the earth and everyone in it. I believed that God gave me right from wrong in the Ten Commandments and sent Jesus to die for our sins. I believed all the things we say in our creeds and confessions and learn in confirmation class. But we didn’t ever talk about what God called us to do, we talked about what we wanted to do or didn’t want to do. So why do we need to be called by God? Why don’t we just go around saying “I wanted to do this, or I choose to do that?” Do we really need to talk about calls?

Well, maybe you say “We don’t need to talk that way.” Maybe we would all do just fine if we all said “I did this because this is what I wanted to do not because I was called by God.” But I want to tell you that I think there are basically two kinds of people when it comes to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the first place, I think there is the kind of person who goes around believing that he is a pretty good person and who has to be convinced that he has something to be forgiven for or that there is anything he is unworthy of. You know each week in this church we pray the prayer of confession and we talk about some of the things we have done to sin against God, and we do this because we Presbyterians are big on sin. Sin is one of our things, just like every tradition has its things. But every now and then someone will say to me, “Pastor I don’t know why I have to pray this prayer of confession, I haven’t done all these things.” To that, I usually say, “Well you don’t have to pray it if you don’t want to.” But when I say that, they usually know that I’m just being difficult. Their point of course is that *I think* they should pray the prayer of confession and they don’t think they should. I think some of us would be surprised, very surprised at how many people there are out there who don’t believe they have anything to be forgiven for, so why do they need a savior. Why does anyone need to die for them? But then there are other people, other people who are all the way at the other extreme and they are utterly convinced that they are so bad, they are so sinful, they are so unworthy that God could never love them or ever even speak to them and they should never go near or even handle the things of God.

The other day I was at Aultman Hospital visiting someone and I passed through the Emergency Room and there must have been twenty people in the Emergency Room who had masks on their faces so they couldn’t breathe their germs on other people. Have you ever been

so sick that no one wants you to touch them or to breathe on them or to even come within ten feet of them? Well that is how some people feel about themselves when it comes to holy things, divine things, the things of God. They feel in the depth of their bones that they are so bad, and they have so much to be ashamed of that they shouldn't even come near the things of God. Now, if you are the kind of person who says why should I pray that prayer of confession, if you are the kind of person who needs to be convinced that you have ever done anything that you need to be forgiven for, I think it would be fine for you to say I choose to do this for God or I choose to do that for God, and it may be hard for you to imagine what it is like to be someone who is in this second group, but there are people in this world who cannot choose to serve God with their lives any more than they can choose to make a square circle, or frozen fire, such a choice is something to them which simply makes no sense. So how can people like that ever come to serve God with their lives? Wouldn't it take the voice of God to call them to do it? Wouldn't it take the voice of God to come to them and say forget what everyone says, forget whatever you've been taught, forget whatever you've believed about yourself, perhaps even for your entire life. I am calling you to do this holy thing, I am calling you to step out and do my will.

And maybe you aren't comfortable around such people, maybe when such a person tells you about their call, you will look at them a little differently. At the very least you may think they are a little flaky, and at most you might actually think they are insane. But one thing I can promise you is that the idea of serving God is not one that could possibly come from them. To be a deacon and help people in the name of God is an idea that could never come from them. To be an elder and lead a church in the name of God is an idea that could never come from

them. To be a minister and proclaim the gospel in the name of God, or to be a missionary and spread the gospel in the name of God is an idea that could never come from them.

Well, isn't that what we have today in this story with the boy Samuel? Samuel is too young to be a prophet of the Lord and before he hears this voice of God calling to him surely there must have been adults who told him as much. "No child has any business speaking for God; speaking for God is adult business." And as you know when you are a child whatever an adult says to you is true. It is simply true because adults are the authority. This young boy could not have chosen to be a prophet for himself.

Maybe the idea that God could call you is something that you never considered, or maybe it is something you just don't think about much. Maybe you believe in the gospel and all the things we say in the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed the way that I did when I was growing up, but the idea of God calling you is just something a little foreign. If that is so, I'm guessing that's probably not going to change after listening to one sermon. But there is a far more important question that I have for you and that is can God do the impossible in your life. Can God do something in your life that you never dreamed of, or something that you considered off the table, beyond consideration? Can God do something in your life that you've never dreamed possible, or are you simply too old, too young, too unworthy. Can God do the impossible in your life, or are you just too ordinary, or are you too tired, are you too discouraged? What can God do in your life that you have already decided is off limits and is out of the question. I think that's really what this Samuel story is all about, what do you think?