

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Mind Your Call”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Ordinary 2--January 14, 2017

Lessons: 1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51

Robert Fulghum writes about vocation: “Well, so what is it you do?” Your basic strangers-on-a-plane question...When I ask people what they do, I usually get a stiff little piece of 3 1/2” x 2” paper that summarizes their identity. Name, company name, title, address, lots of numbers...business card....

“I had no business card. Can’t seem to get me down on that little piece of paper. What I do is kind of complicated and takes such a long time to explain that I often avoid the question and just pick something simple that’s true but not the whole truth.

“On an early-morning flight to San Francisco I told my seatmate that I was a janitor, thinking that she might not want to pursue that and would leave me to read my book. (*When I think of how I have spent my life and how much of it involves cleaning and straightening and hauling trash—I don’t get paid for it, but that’s what I do a lot.*) Anyhow, she was fascinated. Turned out she wrote a housewives’ column for a small newspaper and was glad to spend the rest of the flight sharing her tips for tidy housekeeping with me...Turned out, too, that she was a member of the church where I was to speak on Sunday. I didn’t know that until I stood up in the pulpit and saw her there in the third row.

“Another time I was bumped into first class on a flight to Thailand and was seated next to a very distinguished looking Sikh gentleman. Lots of expensive jewelry, fine clothes, gold teeth. (*Probably a high-caste bazaar merchant, I thought.*) When he asked me the what-do-you-do question I replied off the top of my head that I was a neurosurgeon. ‘How wonderful,’ said he with delight. ‘So am I!’ And he was. A real one. It took a while to unscramble things...

“Marcel Duchamp, whom most people think of as a fixture in the world of fine art during the period before 1940, was equally frustrated by the implications of the standard inquiry. He would answer, ‘I am a *respirateur*’ (a breather). He explained that he did more breathing than anything else, and was very, very good at it, too. After that people were usually afraid to ask him what else he did.”

“I have a business card now,” Fulghum writes. “Finally figured out what to put on it. One word. ‘Fulghum.’ That’s my occupation. And when it give it away, it leads to fine conversations. What I do is to be the most Fulghum I can be...I and you—we are infinite, rich, large, contradictory, living, breathing miracles—free human beings, children of God and the everlasting universe. That’s what we do.”¹

Well, so what is it you do? This is a question of vocation. Any of you who have taken Latin will remember that vocation comes from the word *vocare* which means *to call*.

Our lessons today focus on vocation, the question of what God calls us to be and what God calls us to do. It has to do with much more than our jobs; it has to do with how we live our lives. In our first reading, young Samuel has been sent to live at the Temple, to learn from Eli, the priest, in a time when the word of the Lord was rare and visions were not widespread. Samuel heard a voice that called him into a whole new vocation. God called to Samuel and Samuel assumed that it was Eli calling and went and woke up the poor old man asking what was needed. Eli, whose eyesight (and perhaps with it, whose perception) had grown dim, simply grumbles that he didn’t call. *Go back to bed and stop interrupting my sleep, which is hard enough to come by.* Of course the voice calls again and again Samuel wakes up Eli and again Eli sends him away. The third time the voice calls and Samuel again responds by waking up Eli, the far recesses of Eli’s mind seem to clear for a moment and he realizes that this might be God calling. So he sends Samuel back with the instructions to listen carefully and if the voice calls again, answer it: “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” In that conversation with God, Samuel was given a difficult job. He had to tell his mentor, his teacher, the old man Eli that his days were ending, that God was tired of Eli and his family, that the old ways were finished and

¹ Robert L. Fulghum, *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It* © 1988 Random House.

God was starting something new. For Samuel the new included a life long service as prophet and judge. It was Samuel, you may remember, who would anoint Saul and David as king. It was Samuel who also had the difficult job of confronting Saul with the news of God's rejection. God called and Samuel's life changed. Well, so what is it you do or more pointedly, what is it you are called to do?

We don't often hear God speaking to us today. As was true in the time of Samuel and Eli, the word of the Lord is rare and visions are not widespread. And yet God continues to call. Scripture is full of stories about God calling in powerful ways: think of Moses and the burning bush; think of Mary and the angel announcing that she would have a son; think of Paul and the Damascus Road. Most of us have not had that kind of experience, but some people, even some people here, have.

Sister Elaine Prevallet writes: "I am not a person who hears voices and sees signs, but my own call was a classic thunderbolt. I was nineteen years old, a junior in a Catholic women's college, an English major. It was fall, about nine o'clock in the evening, and I was in my dormitory room reading.... I found myself more than normally distracted, aware that I was reading the same paragraph over and over, not absorbing a word of it. *There's something on my mind*, I said to myself. *I'd better see what it is*. I put the book down in my lap and the message was there, large as a neon sign, loud as a boom box in full volume right at my ear: YOU HAVE TO BE A NUN. No still small voice this, no gentle invitation. Imperious, compelling, inescapable. Surprising, upsetting, and totally unwelcome."² Sometimes God speaks directly. Yet, as Prevallet goes on to say, "there is no 'typical' call. Other persons, no doubt more open-minded and willing than I, seem to experience their call in a gentler process, involving a gradual clarifying. Others make step-by-step choices, learning from their experience, heeding the counsel of mentors and friends, sorting and discerning."³ That is much more my experience. I've heard, or more accurately *felt*, the voice of God speaking through a quiet inner voice. God speaks in different ways, and as Prevallet goes on to say, "God only calls us to be who we are."

Sometimes God speaks to us by not speaking. Parker Palmer writes about his struggles to hear God's call. "I was in my mid-thirties and suffering terminal frustration from my failure to find a vocation that seemed real and right." He was living in a Quaker community and whenever he talked about his plight, people would hand him a piece of Quaker piety that sounded good but that only made him more frustrated: "Have faith," they would say, "and way will open."

"One day, ...I took my troubles to an older Quaker woman whom I admired.

"'Ruth,' I said, 'Friends keep telling me that 'way will open' if I keep faith. Well, I've tried and tried. I pray, I sit in silence, I listen for leadings--but no 'way' is opening for me. I'm thirty-five years old, and I've tried several kinds of work, but none of them makes any sense. I've been trying to figure things out since I was fifteen, and I'm still clueless about what I am called to do. 'Way' may open for other people, but it's sure not opening for me.'

"Her reply was a model of Quaker plain speaking: 'I'm a birthright Friend,' she said, 'and in sixty-plus years of living, way has never opened in front of me.'

"She paused, and I sank. Was this wise Friend telling me that the Quaker concept of God's guidance was a hoax? Then she spoke again: 'But a lot of way has closed behind me—and that has had the same guiding effect.'"⁴ Palmer goes on to suggest that sometimes "all we need to do is stop pounding on the door that is closed, turn around, and see the largeness of life that now lies open to our soul."⁵ Sometimes God speaks by not speaking.

² Elaine M. Prevallet, *Minding the Call in Weavings*, A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life, May/June 1996 Vol. XI/3 © 1996.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, Jossey-Bass © 2000 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

⁵ Ibid.

We live in a time when the word of the Lord is rare and visions are not widespread, but God still speaks, if we are listening.

I think this weekend of the experience of Dr. King. Some of you know, I suspect, that he did not really plan to be the great leader he became. He was content simply to be a good local pastor, but God had other plans. In the early days of the Montgomery bus boycott, King had an experience that shaped the rest of his ministry. He described it this way: “After a particularly strenuous day, I settled in bed at a late hour. My wife had already fallen asleep and I was about to doze off when the telephone rang. An angry voice said: ‘Listen..., we’ve taken all we want from you. Before next week you’ll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery.’ I hung up, but I could not sleep. It seemed that all my fear had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point.

“I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing to be a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I determined to take my problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. ‘I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.’

“At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, ‘Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.’ Almost at once my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me an inner calm.”⁶

That same inner voice spoke to Dr. King throughout his life, calling him again and again to stand up for righteousness, to stand up for truth. That voice surely spoke through Dr. King’s words at the Lincoln Memorial when he spoke of his dream, really God’s dream of all God’s children standing together—a dream that still challenges us as a nation today. And God’s voice also spoke through Dr. King’s words when he broadened the Civil Rights movement to question our economic priorities. Shortly before he was killed, Dr. King spoke words that continue to challenge to us today: “In the days ahead we must not consider it unpatriotic to raise certain basic questions about our national character. We must begin to ask, ‘Why are there forty million poor people in a nation overflowing with such unbelievable affluence?’”⁷ That too is part of Dr. King’s dream. Where are we today called to stand up for righteousness, to stand up for truth?

We live in a time when the word of the Lord is rare and visions are not widespread. And yet...and yet God still speaks. God still calls. Listen. Listen. I think I can hear God calling your name.

Let us pray: We are saints a-borning by your grace, O God. Without your help we will not become what we long to be. This day we pray that you will go on changing us by grace. Generate in us a still stronger desire not to be successful but to be faithful. Create in us still greater strength to keep on despite discouragement. Fill us with dreams that can renew us and others in an age of pessimism and despair. Heighten our longing to dare and be daring. Stir within us the deep desire to commune ever more fully with you. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.⁸

⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom*, Harper & Brothers. © 1958.

⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go from Here?*, SCLC Presidential Address, in *A Testament of Hope; The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Edited by James M. Washington. Harper San Francisco © 1986.

⁸ E. Glenn Hinson, *What the World Needs Most*, in *From Our Christian Heritage*, Edited by C. Douglas Weaver, Smyth & Helwys © 1997.