Sunday, January 19, 2003
LISTENING FOR THE CALL OF GOD
I Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51

Both of these stories from the Bible — one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament — are about individuals who hear and respond to a call from God. The young boy Samuel, while lying down in the temple of the Lord, heard a voice calling him, "Samuel, Samuel." Samuel thought, "It must be the old priest, Eli, calling me." So he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am. I heard you calling me." Eli said, "No, go back to sleep. I didn't call you." This happened two more times, and it was then that Eli knew God was calling the young boy, Samuel. So he told Samuel, "If you hear someone calling you again, answer the call by saying, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" This was the beginning of Samuel's call to be a prophet for God and a lifetime of listening to God.

The second story from John's gospel is about Jesus calling some of his first disciples. Only part of the larger story was read — that part about Jesus inviting Philip to follow him. Then Philip found his friend Nathanael and took him to meet Jesus. Nathanael agreed to do that, but he had his doubts, especially when he learned that Jesus came from the town of Nazareth. He expressed his reluctance by asking, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Earlier in John's gospel, in the part of the story that was not read, Jesus had called Andrew and Simon Peter to be his followers. According to the story, like Philip, they accepted the invitation without hesitation. When I first heard these stories as a young child in Sunday School, I didn't give them a second thought. After all, it was Jesus calling. Why wouldn't these men drop everything and follow him immediately? They didn't have to think twice about it.

Later, as a seminary student, I had more questions about these stories. Usually, people don't make decisions of this magnitude without a little more thought. You tell your children, "Don't make snap judgments... think it over... consider your options."

Could any of you do what these early disciples did, even if you were certain you had received a call from God? Get up from your chair and walk out the door, without taking your keys or turning off the lights? Or at least leave one of those little sticky notes on the kitchen table so that when your spouse came home, he or she wouldn't get worried or call the police? According to the gospel stories, except for Nathanael, who at least asked a few questions, Jesus said to the other disciples, "Follow me," and they did. They didn't ask, "Where are we going? How long will we be gone?" or even, "Can I take my toothbrush?"

Remember, too, these early disciples that Jesus called were not religious types, which may be why Jesus called them. They weren't intellectuals. There is also no evidence that they knew Jesus. At least the young boy Samuel was working for the old priest, Eli, and heard the call of God while he was in the temple. What these stories from the Old and New Testaments have in common is that it is God who takes the initiative. You will find this to be true in almost all stories of people who have heard God calling them. And many of them, like Moses and Nathanael, for example, were reluctant at first to answer God's call, and that's okay. It's a risk when you dare to believe that God is calling your name, trying to get your attention.

These are stories about being swept into the flow of God's will. They are not stories about what constitutes the wrong way and the right way to "follow." Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal preacher I admire, has this to say about Jesus' invitation to his original disciples:

“Sometimes following may mean staying home. It may mean letting the hired servant go and taking care of your father Zebedee when he gets too old to fish. Sometimes following may mean casting the same old nets in a new way or for new reasons. It may mean doing something different with the fish you catch or spending the money they bring at market in a different way. It may mean reorganizing the whole fishing business so that the drifters down at the pier have work to do, and so that everyone who works receives a decent wage. It may mean doing less every day, not more, so that there is time to watch how the light changes on the water and how the happy fish leap out of it at dusk, happy to have outsmarted you one more time.”

There’s more than one way to listen and to answer the call of God to follow God’s will for you.

There’s another important question to consider when you are listening and you think you hear the call of God: how do you know it is God calling you and not your own self-interest? A ministerial colleague of mine in another city tells this story. He said he received an incredible letter last year from a man in his city who was running for re-election as District Attorney. It was a form letter addressed to “Dear Pastor.” In the letter, he claimed the Lord Jesus Christ had anointed him to be the District Attorney and to continue in his role, which he defined as being called as a “minister of justice.” The stated purpose of the letter was to enlist the help of all pastors to get him re-elected. The letter said, “Now, I know that pastors can’t tell people who to vote for.” But the letter went on to say that God can, and that he, as a candidate, had been nominated by Jesus himself to be a minister of justice.

I don’t know whether this candidate had been listening for the call of God or not. I do know that when someone says to you that he or she has been talking to God, pay very close attention to what that person says God has told them to do. Too often it was not a dialogue, but a monologue, and a very human one at that. A lot of people invite God into their stories, and it is one of the most unbiblical things you can do. With Samuel and all the other prophets, and with the disciples of Jesus, it was God who invited them into God’s story. That’s as true today as it was in Bible times. God’s call rearranges your notions of justice and mercy. God’s call changes you. God frequently calls you to do things you don’t want to do. God is no one’s campaign manager.

This weekend, many of us in the United States have been observing the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. He was certainly a man who listened to the call of God. And when he heard what God was calling him to do, he was not at all sure that was what he wanted to do. Like Nathanael, he had some doubts and questions.

In 1954, he was called to be the minister of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in downtown Montgomery, Alabama. At that point in his life, he had no idea that one day he would be remembered as he now is.

Like most other cities throughout the South, and in other parts of the United States, segregation was everywhere, and this included public transportation — buses. In Montgomery and in many other cities, the rule was that Blacks were to sit in the back, and if all the white seats were taken by white people, the Black people in the back of the bus were to give up even those seats so that no white person would ever have to stand.

There was a respected Black leader in Montgomery named E.D. Nixon. He was a regional officer in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and a leader in the state and local NAACP.

For more than a year, he and other local Black leaders in Montgomery had been talking about a possible bus boycott to protest the segregation law. But they had not found the right person or issue around which to organize.

Then, on December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for not being willing to give up her seat to a white man. She was taken to jail. E.D. Nixon was able to make arrangements with a friendly white attorney to post bail and get her out of jail.

Later that evening, they met together at the home of Rosa Parks and her husband. Mr. Nixon told her, “Mrs. Parks, this is the case we’ve been looking for. We can break this situation on the bus with your case.” She said, “Well, I haven’t thought of it just like that.” So they talked with her mother and her husband, and finally, they agreed to go along with it. That was the beginning. E.D. Nixon went home and began to organize the boycott. Using a map of Montgomery, he calculated that most of the Black people could walk to work if they wanted to, and they could also organize carpools. Then he began to call the Black ministers in town that he knew. He wanted to organize a citywide meeting of Black people. He said that when he called the new minister in town, Martin Luther King Jr., King said, “Let me think about it a while and call me back.”

When E.D. Nixon called King back, he agreed to go along with the meeting to plan the boycott. Then Nixon told him, “I’m glad you agreed because I have already set the meeting up to meet at your church.” He had chosen the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church for the meeting because it was near the center of the city and was convenient for everyone. At that time, King didn’t even know Rosa Parks.

A few days later, and after several more community-wide meetings, the Black people in Montgomery organized a new group with the name “Montgomery Improvement Association.” E.D. Nixon declined to serve as president and said that he wanted Martin Luther King Jr. to take that office. When someone asked him later why he had chosen Dr. King, he said that a few months earlier, he had heard him speak and told a friend, “I don’t know how I’m going to do it yet, but someday I’m going to hang him to the stars.” And he did.

Martin Luther King Jr. listened to the call of God when it came through E.D. Nixon and Rosa Parks. It was not something he sought or an encounter for which he was prepared. He was not out looking for a closer walk with God. God was looking for a leader to lead His people out of bondage. And that’s how God frequently calls and challenges us. You can also listen to God in other ways, and what you hear is not always what you at first want to do. The Bible reminds us, “God’s ways are not our ways.”

In one of his sermons during the bus boycott, Dr. King tells of another time of listening to God’s calling. Here’s part of what he said:

“The first 24 years of my life were packed with fulfillment. Because of loving parents who provided for my every need, I sailed through high school, college, theological school, and graduate school without interruption. It was not until I became a part of the leadership of the Montgomery bus protest that I was actually confronted with the trials of life.”

“Almost immediately after the protest was undertaken, we began receiving threatening phone calls and letters in our home. They increased day after day. At first, I took them in stride, feeling that they were the work of a few hotheads who would become discouraged after they

discovered we would not fight back. But as the weeks passed, I realized that many of the threats were in earnest. I felt myself faltering and growing in fear."

"After a particularly strenuous day, I had settled in bed at a late hour. My wife had already fallen asleep, and I was about to doze off when the phone rang. An angry voice said, 'Listen n — — -, 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 of my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point."

"I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. 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, with my courage almost gone, I determined to take the problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that night 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 or 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 them alone.'"

"At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before. It seemed as though I would hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying, 'Martin, 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."

"Three nights later our home was bombed. Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My experience with God had given me a new strength and trust. I knew now that God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life."

I believe the voice of God is calling each one of you. It doesn't have to be anything so spectacular. All it means is that you will be open to God's direction in your life. It could mean that you will try once more to talk to your adolescent son or that you will consider forgiving an errant spouse, or that you will not rush past people in your life.

Believe the voice of God is calling each one of you, but you have to listen and pay attention to hear it. To be "called" is to recognize that God wants you to surrender something of yourself to the greater good. God is calling you to a life of gratitude, mercy, forgiveness and compassion. It can be risky. It can be dangerous, but it is also wonderful. Amen.