

When God Calls Your Name

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Niantic Community Church
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Confirmation Sunday

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3 (The Message)

I. Living the Questions

When I was a young Confirmand, one of the questions I was hoping would be answered in my Confirmation Class was how a God who is the Creator of a Universe that is billions of light years in every direction in size could possibly be aware of the likes of us human beings, let alone be capable of communicating with us. Needless to say, this question was not answered in Confirmation!

Now, with the benefit of a four-year Masters of Divinity, followed by a Ph.D. in Biblical Studies that took me an additional five years, followed by thirty years of Christian ministry, I am happy to tell you exactly how the God of the Universe can communicate with us ... Well, not exactly.

Really, I have little better idea now than I did back in Confirmation how God, or the Holy Spirit, can communicate with us. Scientists tell us that the universe is about 93 billion light years in diameter – and this is only the part of the universe we can observe. Who knows how far it goes beyond this?

Scientists estimate that there are approximately 2 trillion galaxies in the observable universe, too. Assuming that each galaxy contains an average of 100 billion stars (a very conservative estimate), that's two hundred sextillion stars – or 2 with 23 zeros after it. If just one in a trillion stars had a planet with life on it even remotely like ours, and God is theoretically just as consciously aware of life on these planets and life forms, this means that God is in communication with life forms on about 200 billion planets.

No, if I rely on logic alone to address the question of how God can communicate with us, my logic tells me that the mere idea of communication is completely absurd. And a great many times in my life, my logic has led me to discard the idea of communication with God.

Yet, I have meditated for approximately thirty minutes each day for the better part of 42 years, listening for God's voice because God keeps showing up! I don't have the faintest clue *how* this can be true. I just know *that* it is true.

And so I prefer to do what Rainer Maria Rilke advised a young poet to do many years ago, which Namoli Brennet reminded us of last week. He advised his young friend to “be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked

rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not seek the answers, which cannot be give you because you would not be able to live them.”

I love this point. If we actually knew *how* God communicates with us in such a vast – and probably vastly populated universe – we would not be able to live this answer anyway. How God does this is God’s issue, not ours. Our issue is to listen.

So, Rilke concludes, “the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

The answer I have lived into after all these years is this: I don’t know *how* it works. I just know *that* it works. So I keep listening.

One of the things I love about the Bible is that the Bible doesn’t try to answer unanswerable questions like “how does God communicate with us,” either. But it does how us how people live the questions. That is, it shows us how certain people – people who have as little clue about how God communicates as we do – actually listen for God’s voice.

The story of Samuel is a case in point. This story, actually, offers us an example of how a great many of us learn to listen for God’s voice, which I prefer to call the voice of the Spirit.

According to the story, for instance, the Spirit had to nudge Samuel several times before Samuel clued into what was going on and then only after a wise elder clued in first and instructed him what to do.

In my own experience, I have found that the Spirit usually has to circle back with the same message multiple times before I begin to realize, “Hey, this intuition I’m feeling doesn’t seem to be coming from my normal inner emotions and feelings. It doesn’t feel quite the same. There’s a quality to it that seems to be speaking deeply within me, yet coming from beyond me, at the same time. Maybe I should pay more attention to it.”

Even then, I have benefited tremendously from a wise elder who has helped me listen for the Spirit’s voice with greater clarity over the years.

So, the story of Samuel rings true to my experience. What also speaks to me in his story is how the Spirit calls Samuel *by name*. In my experience, the Spirit’s voice is deeply personal. The Spirit may not call me by my given name, Eric, but rather speaks directly to my soul – the heart of who I am. In fact, the Spirit seems to know who I am far better than I do. I say this because, one of the ways I have been able to sort out the Spirit’s voice from among all the voices that swirl inside my head is by listening to the voice that calls me into some form of action that speaks most profoundly to what brings me alive in this world.

The way I have often described this phenomenon is that intuitions from the Spirit tend to strike my “sweet spot.” Do you know what a “sweet spot” is on a tennis racket, or a golf club, or a baseball bat? The “sweet spot” is that place where, when a ball hits it, the vibrations resulting from the ball’s impact cancel each other out. This means that the energy of the impact is

translated directly into the ball, not the racket, club, or bat. It's the place where hitting it feels most natural, therefore, and effortless. When a tennis player hits the ball in the racket's sweet spot, the player hardly feels like the ball has been hit, and is able to direct the ball over the net with the greatest energy and accuracy. Hitting the "sweet spot" allows the player to focus on playing the game rather than merely hitting the ball.

Similarly, intuitions that come from the Spirit tend to hit us this way in our gut. They help us sense a way forward amidst a myriad of possibilities that feels most natural, most "like us." A way forward that puts our souls at ease, even if the path seems difficult.

Often, when I am prayerfully considering a range of possible responses to a situation, and my head is full of a wide range of contradictory voices suggesting one way or another of moving forward, the voice I associate with the Spirit is the one where, once I hit on it, something that has been tight within me suddenly loosens and feels at ease. Something anxious within me relaxes. Something angry within me turns peaceful. Something I've been grasping overly tightly to, lets go.

The reason why the Spirit has this particular effect so regularly is because St. Augustine was correct when he once observed, concerning God, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee."

Our heart is *restless* until it finds its rest in Thee. In other words, when we are outside the flow of the Spirit, we get anxious. Every response we make that is not in the flow of the spirit feels turbulent, unnatural, counter-productive ... and exhausting. No matter how frantically paddle, we don't feel in sync with the current.

When we are in sync with the current, the energy smoothes. We don't have to paddle as hard. And even small strokes seem to move us along.

This is why, when we are considering a wide range of possible responses to a situation, I always prioritize the choice that changes my energy from restless to *rested*. It's the exact opposite choice of the one that makes me feel exhausted the longer I contemplate it.

When Samuel heard the "voice of the Lord" speaking to him, calling him on a particular mission, I think this is exactly what was going on. A vision of a particular form of action appeared in his head that, when compared to other actions, something tight within him suddenly loosened and felt at ease. Something anxious within him relaxed. Something angry within him turned peaceful. Something he'd been grasping overly tightly let go.

What is particularly enlightening about Samuel's story is that the mission to which the Spirit was calling him was going to be extremely difficult. He had to deliver some very bad news to Eli the priest, who had been his mentor for many years. News he knew Eli would not want to hear, and might react with anger over. And this would be just the beginning of Samuel's difficult work. Samuel would eventually become one of Israel's greatest leaders since Moses. He would eventually anoint Israel's first king – King Saul. And when Saul strayed overly far from the

Spirit's ways, Samuel would denounce Saul and anoint David as king – an act that could very well have cost Samuel his life.

Yet, keeping with our “sweet spot” analogy, and our “rested” versus “restless” heart, we can assume that one of the ways that Samuel was able to discern the Spirit's voice from all the other voices swirling around in his head is that, when he contemplated delivering a message he knew would not be well-received, or when he contemplated an action that he knew would put his life at risk, something within him did not tighten up but actually relaxed. Instead of feeling like he was moving against the flow, he was moving with it. So inner anxiety turned into inner peace. Fear turned into courage. Turbulence turned into flow.

Because Samuel was able to discern from among these many voices to find his flow, his “sweet spot,” many lives in Israel were made better. Corrupt religious leaders lost their positions. Israel was able to defend itself successfully against multiple invaders. And Israel would transform from a weak and ineffective, loosely bound collection of tribes into a great and mighty nation.

In other words, this “woo woo” stuff matters. It changes lives. It even changes history.

II. Where the Rubber Hits the Road

If you're feeling like all this Holy Spirit stuff is only relevant to people who lived in biblical times, let me conclude with a brief story.

In the year 2000, Christmas Eve fell on a Sunday, just as it will this year. I experienced a touch of the Holy Spirit that Sunday that was in no way dramatic. In fact, it was only in hindsight that I recognized it had all the qualities I normally associate with the Spirit. Yet the result of the Spirit's touch was quite dramatic. I am convinced it was responsible for saving the lives of my two daughters.

Sunday afternoon, I needed to run to Starbucks to pick up some gift cards for the church staff before the Christmas Eve services. The closest one was just a mile away. I'd be there and back within fifteen minutes. But I was at home alone with Arianna and Maren, who were 7 and 9 at the time. If I wanted to go to Starbucks, I'd have to pull them away from the movie they were watching, pack them in the Chevy Tracker I was driving at the time, only to head right back a few minutes later. And it was freezing cold outside by Scottsdale standards – probably 50 degrees!

“Hey girls,” I said, “I need to run a quick errand so you're going to need to come with me.” But just as those words left my mouth, a quiet thought hit me: “Do you *really* need to take them?”

“Of course I do!” I thought to myself. “I'm not one of those bad parents who leave young kids at home alone.”

“Would you really be a ‘bad parent’ if you left them just for a few minutes?” came the response.

Neither Melanie nor I had ever left our children home alone for as much as a minute since the day they were born, so I felt guilty for even considering the question. Yet as I envisioned taking them versus leaving them, a feeling of peace kept quietly returning whenever I considered leaving them behind. That feeling was in sharp contrast to the frenetic activity of my brain, which was thinking, “What are you nuts? What if the house catches on fire in next fifteen minutes, or a burglar comes to the door, or one of them gets hurt and needs help?”

Despite all my inner objections – both logical and illogical – whenever I envisioned leaving the girls behind, something tight within me relaxed; something anxious within me turned peaceful. It turned peaceful even though the logical part of my brain was screaming, “This isn’t proper! This isn’t what a good parent does!” I breathed easy, despite these mental objections. Finally, I decided to trust my gut. Telling the girls I would be right back, and giving them strict orders not to do anything but watch their movie or use the bathroom.

I took off for Starbucks. After purchasing the gift cards, I was sitting at a stoplight at the intersection of McDonald Street and Hayden Boulevard less than a minute from home ... when a car ploughed into me from behind at 35 mph, sending my car careening into the middle of one of the busiest boulevards in all of Scottsdale!

Thankfully, no other cars were speeding down Hayden Blvd when I was pushed into the middle of it. And thankfully, I suffered no injury aside from whiplash, which 6 months of chiropractic therapy eventually resolved. But my vehicle was totaled. The back end of the Tracker having literally been crunched like an accordion clear up to the back of the front seats.

My daughters would have been sitting back there had I taken them with me. They weren’t with me because, for the first time in their lives, I had left them behind – against my own best logic.

Can you see now why I pay so much attention to this weird Holy Spirit stuff? The Spirit’s touches can be quite light and nearly imperceptible – like when something tight in your gut relaxes ever so slightly – but these touches are quite real, and purposeful.

I’ve never had an experience of the Spirit like Samuel’s that dramatically altered the course of an entire nation. Yet, I’ve had many experiences that have dramatically altered the course of my own life and that of others.

So my advice to our Confirmands, and to the rest of us, is: the next time you find yourself considering a range of possible directions, pay attention to what course of action turns anxiety into peace; restlessness into restfulness; fear into faith; turbulence into flow; a misfire into a “sweet spot” moment. Pay attention to the course of action that calls you by your true name, not a false one. For, sometimes, the stakes of your decision are higher than you think.