

What's *your* calling?

2nd Sunday after Epiphany, Year B. January 15, 2006. (Text: 1 Samuel 3:1-10)

Vocation is the word we often use to describe someone's life's work. I might ask a person, "What's your vocation?" and he might say, "I'm a physician." I could ask another person and she would say, "I'm an architect." Another person might say, "I'm an artist." And so on.

But, then, many people earn their living in ways that have nothing to do with *vocation*. They have certain skills, so they look for the best paying job they can find that calls for those skills. For example, my dad was a car salesman. I don't think he ever thought of his job with the Coker Buick Company as a "vocation." It was just a way to support the family. Dad was a first-class *salesman*, though, and maybe that was his real vocation. If he'd been religious, he might have been a preacher. (Selling cars and preaching do have certain skills in common!) For most of my childhood and teenage years my mom was a postal clerk. It was just a job. But mom had a gift for *helping people*, though, and that was her real vocation. When people came into the post office who couldn't write very well, she filled out money order or insurance or customs forms for them. She wrapped other people's parcels for mailing. —They didn't have those neat boxes for sale at the post office back in those days, just brown paper and string.— Mom felt called to *help* people. (Imagine what our local Post Office would be like if the clerks all felt that helping people was their calling in life!)

Just because we may earn our livelihood from a job that has no connection with our vocation doesn't mean we don't each still have a vocation. A vocation is a spiritual matter, not just a career path. To have a vocation means to have a "calling." By definition, a "calling" isn't my own idea. It comes from beyond me. To have a *vocation* means to be directed by God. God is the one who "calls" us to a task and God equips us to do it.

But our sense of divine vocation has to be tested. We're rightly skeptical of the self-appointed prophet and the self-fulfilling prophecy. Although I might feel personally certain of God's call to action, my feelings demand confirmation before I translate them into action. That's because I'm fallible. I need people to help me know for sure that I'm "hearing God" and not simply indulging in wishful thinking. And, of course, the people to whom I turn for guidance need to be people who know how to recognize the Voice of God.

Each of us lives in a world full of voices – more perhaps now than at any time in human history. There's a cacophony of voices ringing in our ears. We're bombarded with "messages" of all kinds, most of which are intended to manipulate us in a way that will put money in someone else's pocket. We need help in sorting out the "messages" that come our way. If we don't get help, we can be confused. We can be misled. We can mistake God's voice, God's call, for something else —and thus fail to obey him. That's the message of the story of the call of Samuel.

Samuel was just a boy. He wasn't a priest; he was more like what we'd think of as an acolyte in the Temple of the Lord at Shiloh. (This was a hundred years before there was a temple in Jerusalem.) Samuel was supposed to sleep in the Temple at night to make sure that the sacred lamp never went out. The lamp symbolized the presence of God among his people. There's irony in this because – as the Bible says – "the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." The lighted lamp meant that God was with them, but God had been completely *silent* for years. In the middle of the night, when everyone was asleep, the Voice of God suddenly called to young Samuel. The boy thought Eli was calling him, so he went to his bedroom and asked, "What do you want, Father Eli?" That happened three times. The last time it happened, old Eli – who had never heard the Voice of God personally – figured out what was going on. After all, he was a priest. He knew the sacred stories of God's people. So he said to Samuel, "That's the Lord calling to you! Go, lie down; and if he calls you again, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" Samuel did as he was told, and he became the greatest prophet since Moses.

Discernment of our vocation from God requires that we be *listening* for God's call. Samuel was listening. He just needed help in recognizing that the voice he was hearing was truly *God's* voice.

How do we listen to God? I think listening to God demands that we practice four disciplines:

- **First, listening to God demands that *we be people who pray*.** This means structuring our lives in such a way that there's a time every day when we close our ears to the babble of voices coming to us from the world —turn off the TV, radio, stereo, computer, cell phone, iPod, *etc.*, get quiet, and open our minds and hearts to God, call upon him in love, and wait to hear his word.
- **Second, listening to God demands that *we meditate on the Scriptures*.** The Bible conveys, we might say, "the language of the Lord." If you want to recognize when the voice of God is speaking to you, when God is calling you to a work for him, you need to know how God has spoken to other people down through the ages. You need to "learn God's language." You do that through not just reading, but *meditating* on God's Word in Scripture.

- **Third, listening to God demands that *we be sensitive to what's happening in the world around us.*** God has put us in community with other people. Loving them is the main mission for all of us, and we can't do that without getting our hands dirty. The Bible shows that the vocation to which God calls each of us is likely to draw us into engagement with other people in response to the crucial events of our time and place. He doesn't call us to live in an ivory tower, a purely spiritual "bubble."
- **And last, listening to God demands that *we be prepared to hear him speaking in ways we might not have expected.*** By this I mean that God sometimes addresses us through words written or spoken by people who don't even believe in him. (Maybe a phrase from a song will come alive for us; or maybe a newspaper article will seem written just for us.) God sometimes uses the "dark speech" of symbolic dreams. And God often speaks through the inner promptings of his Spirit in the hearts of those who love him.

Like the boy Samuel, we need other people – usually people older or at least wiser in faith than we are – to check our perceptions, help us listen better, and help us know *how to answer*. Eli was there to provide the help Samuel needed. Even though Eli himself had never heard the Sacred Voice, he knew God's ways.

All of us who are Christians have a *shared* vocation. We're part of the Church, the community of those called out *from* the world to undertake the mission of God *in* the world. Jesus calls all of us to *follow him*. —I'll talk about that next Sunday.— But I believe that God has a *personal* vocation, a *personal* "calling" for each of us within the broader vocation we share as followers of Christ. One time I prayed, "I know what my 'job' is as a rector. But I'd like it if you'd show me what my mission is, give me a *picture* of my calling." And the Lord said, "*Your mission is to stand on the mountain and point out the trail to the hikers. Tell them, 'This is the way. Keep going.'*" That's a little parable, isn't it? ...a metaphor. But I understood what God was telling me.

Do you want to know what *your* vocation is? If you do, then it's essential to practice the four disciplines of listening to God. That's the way to hear God and discern your calling, the mission he's chosen just for you. And God will supply all the gifts required by your vocation. —In fact, I think God usually supplies those gifts in advance. When we finally discern our calling, we're delighted to discover that we already have the tools we need to fulfill it.

Trust that you have a divine vocation. Trust that you've been equipped for it. All you have to do now is report for orders. Like Samuel, just be still and say, "*Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening.*"