

There is a photograph somewhere of me standing in the chancel of my first call congregation dressed in a home-made (by me) chicken costume. In my call as interim campus chaplain at WVU, I taught parallel parking on the hill beside the chapel. Here at St. Matthew, on average, about once a year, I start my Sunday by finding and disposing of a dead animal. None of this was in the brochure for seminary. Of course, it's not just the call specifically to public ministry but the baptismal call that we all share to holy living and loving service in this broken world that sometimes leads us to do what we don't expect, what we don't necessarily enjoy, and what we certainly wouldn't call glamorous. When we are bold enough to say, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening" we should probably expect the unexpected.

We enter the Old Testament story today at a transitional point in Israel's history between the time of the judges and the beginning of the monarchy. The Israelites conquered the Promised Land but began to stray from the Law, which caused problems with the neighboring nations; God would raise up a leader who would defend them in battle and then govern them in peacetime; the judge would die, Israel would stray; lather, rinse, repeat. Eventually the people will break that cycle, not through faithful living but by demanding a king, which God will grant them, even though the monarchy will cause its own problems. Samuel, who will anoint Israel's first king, stands in between these chapters of Israel's story.

Samuel was dedicated to temple service by his mother Hannah, who had prayed for years for a child. In gratitude for her answered prayers, she brought Samuel to Eli to be raised as his assistant when he was still a little boy; every year Hannah would visit and bring him a new robe because he was young enough that he was still outgrowing his clothes. So Eli is a father figure to Samuel for almost his whole life. By tradition, Eli's own sons should have taken over their father's priestly duties, they are corrupt, abusing and exploiting the people they are supposed to serve. Eli knows this, but doesn't stop them or remove them from their positions of power, so the Lord chooses to work through Samuel.

When Samuel hears his name called in the night, he doesn't recognize it as the Lord but assumes it is Eli calling for help. The third time this happens, Eli tells Samuel that it is the Lord calling, and if Samuel hears his name again, he is to ask what the Lord wants.

Maybe because it is graduation season and our young folks are beginning the new careers for which they've trained, I think of this exchange between Eli and Samuel like a teacher or advisor passing the baton to their protégé. Imagine how proud and excited Samuel must have been when he hears the Lord call his name. Then imagine how devastated he must be when he hears the judgment the Lord pronounces against his mentor, the man who has raised him ever since he was a child.

Samuel doesn't want to be the bearer of bad news; but Eli—who knew what his sons had done and knew that he had failed to stop them—encourages Samuel: *You have to tell me everything the Lord revealed to you; that's the job of a prophet.* And when Eli hears the judgment against him, he says, *Yes, the Lord is right and will do what is right.* Samuel demonstrates what it means to faithfully proclaim God's word, even when that is frightening, and Eli demonstrates what it means to faithfully receive that word, even when it is not personally good news for him. It is good news overall, however, because stopping Eli's sons means that the people won't suffer their abuse and exploitation anymore.

Now, I have never heard God call my name and say, *Preach X, Y, and Z to St. Matthew tomorrow morning.* If I did, I'd be having a few more conversations before I reported back to you. But in light of wars, slavery, and all manner of discrimination and violence having been justified because *the Lord says...or the Bible says...or perhaps more accurately, my preferred interpretation of this translation of this verse of the Bible says...* This story begs the question: How do we know when it really is the Lord who is calling?

Today's gospel reading from Mark helps. Although we often read about their arguments with Jesus, remember the Pharisees are not the bad guys. They are trying to understand the Law better, because the Law was how God invited Israel into relationship; if they could practice the Law more fully, they could enjoy a fuller relationship with God. That isn't really any different than what we believe. When it seems to them that Jesus has violated the Law and is teaching others to do the same, they are concerned for the relationship between God and their whole community. As Christians, we claim that Jesus, the Son of God, lived without sin, so he wouldn't break the sabbath commandment. He's not abolishing or changing the Law. Jesus explains that people weren't made to check off the box that says "I've kept the sabbath" but that the sabbath was created for the good of

people. The sabbath commandment is fulfilled by doing what leads to a good, abundant life; taking a break from working, from traveling, from buying and selling—all that leads to a better, more abundant life. When nobody can tell Jesus that reason for observing the Sabbath, he grieves that they have missed the point of the Law. Jesus restoring the man's hand most likely restores his whole livelihood in a culture and economy that would probably not have made accommodations for someone with a disability. So by doing what gives the man life, Jesus is fulfilling the sabbath law.

If we want to answer the call to share God's good news—and make sure we don't end up accidentally burning people at the stake in the name of the Lord—we test that call, as Jesus' actions on the sabbath did, by whether it is life-giving or not. Scripture was written in very different contexts than ours, which makes it hard for us to understand; and the Bible doesn't come with footnotes to explain what parts are *prescriptive* and what parts are merely *descriptive* of those times and cultures. But we know that it is God who is calling when life grows fuller and more abundant for more and more people; the good news is only good when it brings freedom, justice, and dignity for all people and honors the image of God in everyone.

Going back to Samuel, there are many folks of faith who believe God calls them to condemn other people like God called Samuel to condemn Eli's household; but in Eli's case, the condemnation was of the injustice, abuse, and exploitation that prevented the people from living the full and abundant life God intended for them. In Mark, the religious leaders thought they were called to condemn Jesus for dishonoring the sabbath, but Jesus was honoring the sabbath more than anyone by bringing fuller and more abundant life to the people. Still, that inspired the conspiracy to destroy Jesus, and it's only chapter 3. Now, if ever we are criticized we might first want to take a honest look to see if we deserve it, but if Jesus himself can be accused of disobeying the word of God when he *is* the Word of God, then we shouldn't be surprised if doing what God calls us to do does not result in approval and accolades. Yet, the Lord still calls. May we answer *Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening...* and when we hear how God would have us bring justice, love, and more abundant life to others, may we have the courage to do that.