

How God Gets Through *I Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:35-42*

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The younger members among us will recognize the Silverstein poem “Whatifs”:

Last night while I lay thinking here,
Some whatifs crawled inside my ear

And pranced and partied all night long
And sang their same old whatif song.

Whatif I’m dumb in school?
Whatif they’ve closed the swimming pool?

Whatif I get beat up?
Whatif there’s poison in my cup?
Whatif I get sick and die?

Whatif I flunk the test?
Whatif green hair grows on my chest?

Whatif I tear my pants?
Whatif I never learn to dance?

Everything seems swell and then
The night time whatifs strike again . . . The whatifs.

Of course adults play What If too, especially when they reach a certain age. Often late at night or all alone they will drag out some old class yearbook, browse through the pages and pages of pictures of the classmates they knew best, and recall those days when they first knew them in school (ten or twenty years ago, or whatever it was). Inevitably the eye will halt on certain ones while the mind races back in time, calling up the crazy antics, the fun, the excitement, the heart-breaks. But also the dreams, the ambitions, all those things once talked about doing and becoming after graduation, after we’d grown up.

And then, just as inevitably, they think about those same classmates today. What they have actually done with their lives after graduation, after they have grown up, where they are and who they are today. And that’s when the What ifs begin to crawl inside the ear. What if Shirley had just not married so early? Of if she had played the field more or a little longer. What if Freddie had taken his studies more seriously and hadn’t begun to run with that crowd? And of course, before long the scenario shifts to the self. What if I...had gone to Duke instead of Davidson, majored in chemistry instead of English, gone into the Navy instead of the

Army or maybe neither? What if...? The What ifs belong not only to the young.

The two Bible stories the lectionary gives us today are scattered with What ifs. Both are stories with but minimal interpolation to allow for the passing of time, true to life stories of people who heard, or thought they heard, the voice of God.

First, there's Samuel, shy little kid brought up since the age of two in the Temple under the tutelage of the old and half-blind priest Eli (not because any of it was Samuel's idea, but because Samuel's mother had thought she could not have children, and then when little Samuel came along and surprised them all, interpreted it as God's special gift, and so gave the child to the service of the Lord in the Temple).

Still, as one reads the story, one senses that it was .much more like the kid that gets sent off to summer camp for the convenience of the parents than any burning zeal on the part of Samuel to be there; for though he performed his simple duties well, the story indicates "Samuel did not know the Lord." Nonetheless, one night, nearing daybreak as the story tells it, the oil in the night lamp about to run out, Samuel hears a voice calling his name. Thinking Eli has called, he inquires. Eli says, "No, go back to bed." Note now, nobody, not even the old priest, is expecting God to speak. Scripture says, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision." Nobody but the nuts really expects to hear the voice of God call their name. Now do we? I told some of you of that taxi driver from Daytona Beach who, years ago when I was still at Central Presbyterian Church, cornered me one Sunday saying God had directed him to announce his candidacy for president from Central church. When I inquired, "Why here?" he was quick to answer that it was all part of the plan. God wanted his campaign photograph to show in the background both the cross of the church and the dome of the State house, and it would all be a symbol of his platform, and he wanted permission to announce and to have his photograph taken at Central.

Well, I was nice, and I tried to be sensitive, but I did allow that I thought we could not grant that permission because we really didn't like to mix religion and politics at Central. (I have since repented.) Nonetheless, our Sunday visitor was rare, for these are not days of frequent vision. And when one does show up for Sunday service announcing that he has heard the voice of God, he seems unusually suspect.

You know the story. Three times God called Samuel, and the third time, little Samuel answered, "Speak, Lord, for your servant heareth." And sure enough, God spelled out the call, and Samuel went on to become one of God's most faithful prophets.

In the New Testament, the story is slightly different. This time all the players are adults, grown and graduated and already in a profitable career in the fishing business when they encounter Jesus. And after spending some time with Jesus, they decide to change directions, to quit the fishing business in favor of a more philosophical or spiritual quest, becoming as the old text has it, "fishers of men." Now it's clear at this point, the disciples are not clear. Somewhat like little Samuel, they are not sure what they have heard or what it means. But, there is sufficient interest or curiosity or compulsion (or whatever we call it when we aren't sure); there is something in them that compels them to respond to Jesus' urging, "Come and see."

Now, just imagine all the What Ifs at play here. Late at night when sleep won't come, or maybe in the early dawn when day has not quite broken and the night is hanging on, and the mind is most susceptible. Don't you know Samuel had his moments of wrestling with the What Ifs? "What if...What if what I took for the voice of God was no more than adolescent insecurity?" And those two disciples Andrew and Simon, who somewhat impulsively, it might seem to us, signed on. Simon, always the more impetuous of the two, so taken by the whole event that he changed his name on the spot. Don't you know there were days of second thoughts and nights of "What Ifs," wondering if he had acted wisely. Or possibly over-reacted. And wondering if he had it to do all over again, would he do the same thing. What if?

All of this raises to mind "How does God get through?" If God wants to get through to you and me, how does God get through? And if God speaks to some, why doesn't God speak to all? And if God speaks to all, why doesn't God speak as clearly and as convincingly to some as he does to others? What if the voice of God is no more than the subjective whisperings of my own desire? What if God's voice is but the verbalization, the human verbalization, of my own psychological need for security and approval or for punishment, as the case may be? What if the voice of God can be explained away as my own craving for love and acceptance? And for psychic companionship, for some assurance that I am not alone, but that there is more to life than just me, more to time than just now, more to history than the simple acting out of my own lusts? Or, on the other hand, what if God is all those things God is supposed to be: truth, hope, virtue, love, purpose. How does God get through to folk like us who crave truth, hope, virtue, love and purpose?

I do not know, and Scripture does not give us all the answers. But I do know some. I know, for example, that we are in that season of the church year which historically has come to be called "epiphany," meaning revelation or appearance or vision or occurrence, like the two given us in the texts today, where God appeared to people, people not altogether unlike you and me, even in times like these when the voice of God is rare, but when God appears and has spoken in convincing ways. There are enough occurrences in Scripture and in subsequent history too for us not to leave revelation only to taxi drivers from Daytona, and indeed enough to offer some credibility to the question "What if God did call my name?"

Well, we don't have all the answers, but the historical human experience counts for something, and if we chronicle all those Biblical epiphanies and add a few of our own, we do know some things. We know, for example, that God never speaks to me at the detriment of another. To the grave disappointment of some I am sure, God does not play favorites, and if what I hear is a voice that suggests violence or injustice toward another person or race or tribe or nation, I know that it is not the voice of the Lord. I know that.

We know, for example, that the voice of God is always a summons to wholeness, healing, harmony, reconciliation, salvation. It is not the will of God that any be lost or that any be ill or that any be less than whole. And any voice that suggests otherwise is clearly not the calling of the Lord. We know that.

We know, for example, that we have to be very careful when evaluating voices, because there are so many impersonations, and so we must be very careful not to evaluate by our values, but by God's. Jerry Falwell was frequently wrong,

but he was right on target when he warned against Jim Bakker's false gospel of affluence, for God does not call some to affluence at the expense of others. God has a higher standard of values, a clearer set of ethics than that. And we know that.

And then another thing our epiphanies have taught us is the foolishness of trying either to predict or to program God's speaking, or on the other hand, to limit when and how God speaks. The spirit blows where it wills, and try as we may, we cannot control the wind. Now, we can of course put ourselves in places, with people, and in environments, where God is known to have spoken before. In church, study groups, retreats, etc. But even that is no guarantee that God will not choose God's own time or place or medium, all of which may come as quite a surprise to those who have been regimented to dislike surprises.

Woody Allen refers to that shocking Old Testament story of God's speaking to Abraham. You remember the account where God is supposed to have spoken to Abraham and suggested that he sacrifice his son Isaac on the altar. As Woody Allen tells the story, Abraham is certain that he has heard the voice of God because "It was a deep, resonant voice, well modulated and nobody in the desert could get a rumble in their voice like that." Later, when Abraham is embarrassed that he did not catch on to God's little joke, Abraham nevertheless pleads with God that his willingness to sacrifice his son should at least prove that he was faithful to God and should count for something even though he was mistaken. And God says, according to Woody Allen, "All it proves is that some people will follow any order, no matter how asinine as long as it comes from a resonant well-modulated voice."

Well, one has to be very careful in presuming or in limiting God. Listen, for example, to Fred Buechner writing of God's way of getting through to folk like us in very unlikely places. Buechner speaks of a time when his own life seemed locked in like a trap or a dead end.

Only, I discovered that it really wasn't that way at all. I discovered that if you really keep your eye peeled to it and your ears open, if you really pay attention to it, even such a limited and limiting life as I was living on Rupert Mountain opened onto extraordinary vistas--taking your children to school and kissing your wife good-bye, eating lunch with a friend, trying to do a decent day's work, hearing the rain patter against the window. There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not to recognize him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly.

And then Buechner goes on at great length, but he sums up his discovery with these words: "Listen to your life," he says. "See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness, touch...taste...smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis, all moments are key moments and life itself is grace. Listen to your life," says Buechner.

Listen to your life, because, I think, some things no one can tell you. Some things you can only hear for yourself. Like that winter Joanna Adams and Ed Loring were on that afternoon radio talk show. The subject was homelessness in Atlanta, and they were describing the shelter ministries that have sprung up all over

town in churches, like the Central Night Shelter, which Joanna described in great detail. And the question was asked if we ever preached to those people. “Do you conduct worship in the Shelter?” And when the answer was “no,” the caller, who one sensed had the question ready, pounced, “Where then is Christ in what you are doing?” Following an awkward pause, Ed Loring said, “I suppose you’ll just have to come down and see for yourself.”

“You’ll just have to come and see”—Jesus’ words to Peter and to Andrew. “You’ll just have to come and see for yourself!” And ask yourself what if? What if Christ is here, present and alive amidst the smelly shelter cots and snores of sleeping homeless men and the gentle grace of a warm, safe place to spend the night and a bowl of hot soup? How does God get through? There is no way one can tell another, except to recall and to share those unexpected epiphanies that have occurred in our own experiences along the way, as we look and listen and become even more open to the calling of our name.

A lingering memory of my own childhood is that of traveling with my father in the summer when school was out. My father worked for the railroad, and his job was to call on the station masters at the various railroad terminals around the state of Florida. I would always sit in the corner or maybe find an empty desk somewhere out of the way while he transacted his railroad business with the station master. What I remember most vividly about those wonderful visits was the constant clackety-clack-clack of the telegraph in those train stations, the little steel hammer clacking away against the Prince Albert tobacco can. I sat in awe and wonder at what messages were flying through the air of those musty old stations, messages which I could hear but not understand. I would imagine all sorts of things. What if there had been a train wreck down the tracks or a bridge was out or there had been a great train robbery. And I remember straining to hear in the clacking the SOS, the only Morse Code I could remember. Now I know that probably those messages were no more than inquiries about lost luggage and delayed schedules. But for me, in those childhood days when I was less steeled against surprises, I wondered what word was trying to get through, what urgent message, what emergency. Everybody else, all the grown-ups there, even the station master whose job it was to listen, seemed so casual and uninterested in what in my imagination were very urgent messages. “What if...?”

That was long ago, but I confess I still play What If every now and then. I still wonder what if God is trying to get through? What if God’s voice is there like the clack of that hammer against that tobacco can, calling out for someone to hear? What if in it all is the sound of my name? What would it mean and what difference would it make? What if those “What Ifs” that climb inside my ear and prance and party all night long and sing their same old What If song, what if, in all that, is found what our epiphany has come to experience as the call, the presence of God? What if God is trying to get through...even now?

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