

At the same time a friend wrote to him saying, "I believe it is the will of God for you to go into evangelistic work here in America." During the same period, Jones received a letter from his denomination's mission board saying, "It is our will to send you to India." And if all of that were not enough, Jones suspected that God's will for him was to go as a missionary to Africa.

Jones described this as a "traffic jam of wills." In the end, after much prayer, he eventually became convinced that he should go to India, which he did, and where he ministered faithfully until his death. But at the time of the competing calls, he had no foolproof way to be sure which, if any, was God's will.

**God still speaks and calls.** The biblical account of Samuel reminds us that even in times when the world around us is not tuned in, *God still speaks and calls*. In terms of the Bible's timeline, the period when Eli and his two no-good sons were priests of the Lord, judges ruled the land, and, as the book of Judges notes: "All the people did what was right in their own eyes" (21:25). Of course, what many decided was "right in their own eyes" was nowhere close to what was right in the eyes of God.

In such times, it's quite possible that even those working in the world of religion aren't all that tuned into the possibility of the Lord speaking. Notice that it wasn't until Samuel had run to Eli three times that it occurred to Eli that it was God summoning the boy.

The story also shows us that the call God wants us to take may start with bad news. What Samuel heard first, once he took the Lord's call, was a powerful word of judgment against Eli and his sons, words which it fell to young Samuel to deliver. In time, Samuel received better news from God, and he became a popular prophet to all of Israel.

**How can we tell when God is calling?** Which brings us back to the question of how we discern when God is calling. It's not like we have a photo icon that appears when we get an incoming call on our smartphones. The story of John Seybert is useful here. Seybert, was the first bishop of the Evangelical Church, one of the forerunner denominations when came together to form the United Methodist Church. The Evangelical Church specialized in ministry to the German-speaking immigrants on the American frontier.

Seybert, born in 1791, entered the ministry in 1820 and became, somewhat reluctantly, a bishop in 1839: reluctant because he didn't think he was worthy. In those days, being a bishop of the church didn't earn you a lot of honor. It just meant you worked harder and

traveled even more than the regular circuit riders. Seybert never married, but devoted his life to the church, traveling constantly to begin new congregations and minister to people on the frontier. From his journals, we know that he logged 175,000 miles by horse and wagon, preached 9,850 sermons, made 46,000 pastoral calls, held 8,000 prayer meetings and helped establish congregations throughout the Midwest. For all this, he received a salary of \$100 per year, out of which he paid all his expenses. Bishop Seybert, moved by human need, frequently gave people money out of his own pocket with no thought of repayment.

In his travels, Seybert noted the scarcity of good Christian literature in the German language on the American frontier. So, on three occasions, he brought a cargo of such books over the mountains from Pennsylvania for distribution to folks in Ohio and the Midwest. In 1842, for example, he brought 23,725 volumes to Ohio in his wagon. He paid for these books out of his own pocket, and then sold them at cost. Seybert later said that he neither made nor lost money on these projects.

Here's my reason for telling you about Seybert: before entering the ministry, Seybert was a cooper, a barrel maker, and he made a decent living at that trade, but he felt the call of God to preach. He wasn't sure, however, and delayed answering the call because he was uncertain whether God was truly calling him. Here's what he wrote in his journal:

"I [finally] determined, if it be God's will, to labor in his vineyard with my Evangelical brethren. I should have gone sooner, had I been certain that the Lord wanted me to go. However, I had no rest at my cooperage, and concluded that the only way to get into the clear concerning this matter, was to make an effort. If the Lord blesses my labor with the awakening and conversion of sinners, and the edification and encouragement of saints, I determined I would serve him in this way with all my ability, wherever I might have to go, whatever crosses I might have to bear, and however long the task might last."

This journal entry describes what we might call the "Seybert method" of determining if God is on the line. Seybert wasn't sure, so he decided to make a beginning in the direction that seemed right. He felt certain that if that wasn't God's will, he would soon find out. "If the Lord blesses my labor..." Seybert wrote. Sometimes that's the only way we can determine the right thing to do: make a start at it.

Starting is always a sign of hope. Making a beginning is a statement of belief in, or at least hope for, a good outcome. When we sense God calling us to make a beginning, at whatever that may be, it's important to not let discouragers or opponents or distractions turn us away.

Of course, we should not understate the importance of finishing what we start. Jesus said, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). Nonetheless, nothing ever gets finished that doesn't get started.

Even God takes this kind of initiative. If God didn't, the created world and all that's in it would not exist. The Bible opens with God making a start: "In the beginning, God created..." (Gen. 1:1). The Bible closes with a voice from the throne of God saying, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 21:6). This is the testimony of God who is the truth, the beginning, center and end of all creation. God the Alpha and God the Omega is present with us everywhere and always. When we begin what God calls us to, God is with us.

What is waiting for a start in your life? Is there anything about which you even wonder if it could be God giving you a nudge? Have you tested it? Is it possible God is calling you to get training for something? To start something? To begin the walk of faith? Are there discouragers or opponents or distractions that prevent you from starting? The Bible suggests that sometimes you must make a start to find out what should be finished. Not everything should, but sometimes, we won't know until we begin. Like Mr. Watson and like Samuel, the call you hear may be your name, followed by "I want to see you."

Prayer: You speak in unexpected places, and with unexpected voices, God. And we aren't always sure how to listen. We aren't always sure who to listen to. We aren't always sure if we're really hearing you. Be blunt with us, please. Be clear. Give us the challenge of loving you, of loving the other, of loving ourselves. And help us to live it out! Because you are God who loves us all, even when we don't know where to turn. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen!

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## Taking the Call

Sunday, January 21, 2018

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

1 Samuel 3:1-10

"Mr. Watson, come here. I want to see you." Those are the famous first words transmitted by telephone, spoken by Alexander Graham Bell on March 10, 1876, into an early telephone prototype and heard by his assistant, Thomas A. Watson. The proof that Watson, who was in another part of the lab, heard those words on a device at his end was that he came as summoned. Watson, we might say, was the first to "take the call."

Watson was the first, but not the last to take an important call. In 1969, astronauts Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong, while walking on the moon, took a congratulatory call from President Richard Nixon. In 2015, the U.S. World Soccer team, which had just won the World Cup, took a congratulatory call from President Barack Obama.

Most of the calls we take, however, are not from famous people and are often about more mundane matters. Still, many calls transmit useful information that keeps our schedules ticking or updates us on family news or just puts us in touch with friends. Then, there are times when we probably shouldn't take a phone call: during dinner or in a movie theatre or during a worship service. I once had someone take a call during a funeral. So not cool!

This leads us to the story about the young Samuel, asleep in the worship center at Shiloh, when he heard his name called. He took the call, but assumed the caller was the elderly priest Eli. When he went to Eli, the old man said it wasn't he who called. After this happened three times, Eli finally realized that it must be the Lord summoning the lad, so he instructed Samuel to take the call. And so, began Samuel's role as a prophet of the Most High God.

One problem for *us* regarding the call of the Lord, however, is uncertainty. It is not that we're unwilling to take the call, but that we're often not sure it's our spiritual mobile that's ringing. And, even when it is, we may be uncertain that the voice we're hearing is really the voice of God rather than just an idea that popped into our head out of nowhere.

Consider the case of E. Stanley Jones, an American Christian and long-time missionary in India. He gave his life to Christ at 17, and at age 23, a college president asked him to teach at the college, telling him, "It is the will of the student body, the will of the townspeople, the will of the faculty and we believe it is the will of God for you to teach in this college."