

I have often wished that I could hear the voice of God as clearly as Samuel did in the first reading this morning. It's worth noting where he was when he heard God – he was in the temple, where the ark of God was. For the Hebrew people, the ark of the covenant was the resting place of God, the Holy of Holies. Samuel was physically in the presence of God. Our contemporary understanding of God is that God is present in and through the whole of Creation, but we all know that there are physical places where God seems especially present. There are also inner places where we open to God in a clearer way.

We cannot control when God speaks to us, when the Spirit moves in our lives, but we can intentionally open ourselves to God. We can place ourselves in the holy place of our hearts; we can draw close to God. We have been promised that when we draw near to God, God will draw near to us. (James 4:8) Samuel had drawn near to God and even though it was a time when the voice of God was rare and visions were not widespread, God called to him.

Discerning the call of God is our constant task as followers of Jesus. That call may be life-changing or it may be small but it is God's voice that we listen for. There have been a couple of times in my life when God's voice was almost palpable but mostly it's an inkling, a direction, quiet clarity coming out of confusion – usually in answer to a prayer for direction. Every day I ask that God will lead my footsteps, my thoughts and my words, so sometimes God's call is scarcely distinguishable from the choice I make based on what I know at the time, trusting that my prayer and my intention is guiding me in the path of Christ.

I think we often expect God's call to be either very noticeable or to call us to some noble endeavor. It's interesting that God's call to Samuel was not to go and do a big project, but to give his friend and mentor Eli some unwelcome news. Samuel was reluctant. But he went ahead with

what proved to be his first big prophecy and before long all Israel knew that he was reliable prophet. Similarly God's calls to us may seem to be very minor but when we are faithful even in the smallest things, bigger ones are given to us. And what seems small to us may have major implications.

I wonder if the disciples in the gospel reading realized the full implications of eating a little grain. We heard that Jesus and his disciples walked through a field on the Sabbath, and as they walked they ate some of the grain that is growing there. The Greek text has Sabbath as Sabbaths (plural) and the verb tense indicates something that happened in an ongoing way, so this was no doubt something that happened several times not just on this occasion. It had become a bone of contention between Jesus and the Pharisees. Yet even though Jesus knew he was heading for a confrontation, he continued to let his disciples harvest grain on the Sabbath.

Why?

I don't think it was just a teaching moment. I think this was deliberate provocation. We might even see it as non-violent civil disobedience. The Pharisees were the ones who tried to interpret the law into contemporary life. They were the ones who controlled the people by saying what was ok and what wasn't. We might even see them as the Taliban of their day – imposing what they believed to be God's will in a way that reduced liberty and took away joy.

Jesus incarnated as part of God's plan for the redemption of Creation. He saw himself as carrying out his "father's" plan. In the beautiful hymn from Philipians which we use sometimes in place of the Creed, we hear that "Being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil 2:8) the word

obedience comes from the word to listen. Jesus' response to the call of God for ministry to the world was very different from slavish obedience to the law. Jesus came to show us that God's love is unconditional and freely given; that God does not need us to give up our joy, to restrict our lives in order to please him, but that God wants us to truly enjoy the joy of our own true nature.

Jesus put it like this, "the Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath." Sabbath keeping helps us to get closer to God, to place ourselves in the holy place so that we may hear God. Our culture rarely heeds the call for quiet, for time apart. We are constantly called by the many demands upon us. It's difficult to stop responding to texts and emails. I know it's difficult for some of us not to surreptitiously read texts or check email even during the sermon. We are "on" all the time – Sabbath is a time to take apart from all that. Sabbath is intended for our better enjoyment and fulfilment, not to satisfy a demanding and rule-creating God.

So in obedience to his call from God, his mission, Jesus is engaging in conscious civil disobedience – he is not listening to the call of the Pharisees for a guilt-ridden adherence to a set of rules designed to limit human behavior – his obedience is to the God of life who longs for each of us to become the people we were made to be, and longs for the whole of Creation to be redeemed and reconciled with God. He knows that this path will lead to confrontation. And he's right – so much so that "the Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him."(3:6)

This was not a minor issue. For the Pharisees it was becoming a life and death battle because Jesus was challenging their rules and taking away their power. Listening to the call of God was bringing him into direct opposition to the powers of the day.

As we listen to God's call we may not hear a comfortable spiritual message. But neither will God ask us to do to to be something which is not within our ability. It's unlikely that God is going to call us to go to darkest Africa. When I was a teenager I was sure that God was sending me to Ethiopia, but it turned out to be Los Osos instead. I'm grateful; I'm sure that I'm much more comfortable here than in Addis Ababa. But the fact that God has called me to serve in a beautiful and comfortable part of the world does not make my service less valuable than if I were in an Ethiopian village.

God may have called you to serve primarily in your family or by loving your neighbors. These are not glamorous calls but they are none the less real. Each one of us is called to love and serve God in the situation in which we find ourselves. Each one of us can intentionally open our hearts to God so that we will be ready to hear God calling our names in the temple in the quiet of the night.