

God's Story: Main Character

[1 Samuel 3:1-10](#)

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Earlier this year, we held catechism classes for some of the youth in the church, and at each gathering, I asked them to write down any questions they had about God, the Bible, or the Church, and we would spend a little time each night answering those questions. And one of the questions that came up during our group was “Why isn’t there a book of the Bible named after David?” And that is a good question. David is one of the most important characters in the Old Testament – he’s Israel’s first truly great King, the one who transforms the people from a disorganized collection of squabbling tribes into a true nation, setting the gold standard for what a King should be and how a King should behave. After David, every other King is compared to David, evaluated on how closely they live up to his standard or on how far short they fall. And even after the Kingdom falls apart, the people still remember David and long for the day when one of his descendants will reclaim David’s throne and re-establish David’s kingdom. But David’s story isn’t told in the book of David. It’s told in the book of Samuel, first and second Samuel. And that is surprising, because we usually think you should name a book after the book’s main character, the person who drives the action, the one the story is built around. The Harry Potter books all have Harry Potter’s name, right there in the titles. The Hobbit is called the Hobbit, not A Very Bad Day for Three Trolls named Tom, Bert and William. Shakespeare didn’t call Romeo and Juliet “Friar Laurence, failed Marriage Counsellor”. In the stories we tell, we usually focus on the main character, we put

their name on the cover, but the main character of the book of Samuel isn't Samuel. Samuel only shows up in the first few chapters of the first half of the book, and likely the only story people remember about him is the one we read this morning, the story of the calling of Samuel.

And the thing is, Samuel isn't even the main character of this story, the story we read today. When we meet Samuel, he is working for the priest Eli at the tabernacle, the tent that God's people had built at Mount Sinai to serve as the meeting place between God and Israel. The tabernacle was meant to be God's house on earth, the place where God's people could come and meet with their creator who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt and led them to the promised land. Samuel's parents had dedicated him as a gift to God, to serve Eli in the tabernacle, and he had spent his entire life there, helping Eli to carry out his work as priest for the people. He saw his parents once a year, and he saw the various people who came to bring sacrifices to God, and he saw Eli's sons, corrupt scoundrels who would steal the offerings from the pilgrims and keep them for themselves, but most days, it was just Samuel and Eli, together each and every day, caring for the tabernacle, caring for the people, Samuel and Eli, Eli and Samuel. In Samuel's story, Eli is the main character, his life revolves entirely around serving Eli, his mentor and master. So when Samuel wakes up in the middle of the night and hears someone calling to him, of course he assumes that it's Eli. Who else could it be? It's just the two of them, alone in the tabernacle in the middle of the night. Samuel runs to Eli and wakes the old man up, and he tells Samuel, I didn't call you, Go back to sleep. This happens three times – three times, Samuel hears the voice calling him, and each time he runs to Eli, certain that his master is calling him. And after the third time, Eli finally starts to figure

things out – maybe it took a few times for him to completely wake up, but when Samuel comes running a third time, Eli tells him that the voice he has been hearing isn't his voice, it's God's voice. God is the one calling him in the middle of the night, and Eli tells Samuel, if he hears the voice again, answer, Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.

It's a wonderful story, but when you think about it a little bit, doesn't it strike you as a little strange? I mean, think about where they are when this entire story happens. They're inside the tabernacle. They're inside God's house. We're told that Samuel was sleeping inside the Holy of Holies, the innermost place where they kept the Ark of the Covenant. And Samuel spends all his time, each and every day, offering sacrifices to God, guiding pilgrims to worship God, surrounded by all the symbols of all the mighty things that God has done for the people in the past. Isn't it strange that it never occurs to him that it might be God calling him? You're living in God's house, eating God's food, doing God's work, and a strange voice calls you – who else could it be? Samuel never considers the idea that God might be calling him, because he doesn't even really know that God is there. He doesn't really understand anything about God. We're told that the word of the Lord was rare in those days, that visions of God's presence were not widespread. And we're told that Eli's own vision had begun to grow dim, and it's clear that this doesn't just refer to his physical vision, but his spiritual vision as well; Eli has failed as God's priest, and he is no longer able to see God's presence and hear God's word. Samuel has spent his entire life living in God's house, doing God's work, and yet we're told that Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. All these years Samuel has been working and serving, thinking that he's doing it all for Eli, his master and

mentor, he's never realized who he's really serving, who his master truly is. Samuel thinks his world consists of only him and Eli, the servant and the master, the pupil and the teacher, he thinks they are the only characters in his story, but God is about to completely rewrite his story, completely transform the way he sees the world. God's voice speaks to Samuel, and from that moment on, his life will never be the same. From that moment on, he will see himself no longer as Eli's apprentice, a low level employee in the tabernacle. From that moment on, Samuel becomes God's prophet, God's spokesperson to the people of Israel, Samuel becomes the one who will bring the word of the Lord to the people so they can hear and understand who God is, so they can hear God's voice and follow it all the days of their lives.

And that still doesn't mean that Samuel is the main character of the book of Samuel, or even of this story. The main character of this story isn't Samuel or David, or Eli, or Saul, or any of the other people we meet in this book. The main character, the one who drives the action, who rouses people out of their passive lives and drags them along on adventure, the main character of this story is God. God is the one who speaks and changes Samuel's life forever – God's voice brings transformation and judgment, endings and beginnings, mercy and grace. And God doesn't call Samuel because he's anything special, because he's particularly wise or devout or holy – at the moment he's called, Samuel has no idea who God even is, despite working every day of his life in God's house, Samuel can't recognize the voice calling him because he doesn't know who that person is. God calls Samuel, not because of who Samuel is, but because of who God is – God is a God who brings ordinary people into the divine story and gives them a part to play, gives them an opportunity to join in the amazing work that God is about to

accomplish in this world. If God hadn't called Samuel, he would've stayed in obscurity, working in the temple for Eli for the rest of their lives, but because God decided to act, to bring Samuel into the story, the world changes forever, because Samuel leads us to David, and David leads us to the kingdom, the earthly kingdom that fails and falls apart, and the heavenly kingdom ruled by David's descendant that lasts forever. That story starts here, and it starts with God acting in Samuel's life, calling a young boy in the night to wake up and see and hear the God who has been with him his entire life, to listen to the one who will guide him for the rest of his life. From this moment on, Samuel becomes part of God's story.

And that story is still being written. That story is still being told. We gather today, as the church of Jesus Christ, citizens of the heavenly kingdom, workers in God's house. We have been called to do God's work here and now, to feed the hungry and care for the sick and share the love of Jesus Christ with everyone we meet, but sometimes, we can get so caught up in the busyness of our lives and the work we are doing that we forget who we're doing it for. We forget whose house we're working in, whose voice called us to come here in the first place, and we start thinking that we are the heroes, the main characters in a story all about us, about the work we are doing, the plans we make for ourselves. We think that God called us because of how special and talented and holy we are, and we stop paying attention to the voice of God calling us to come and become part of Christ's story, come and tell his story in all we say and do, not because of who we are but because of who Jesus is, because of what he has already done for us. The voice of God is calling us to come and follow, to open our eyes and recognize that God is here with us, God's voice still speaks to us and to our world. The voice of God is calling us to give ourselves over to the good work that Jesus Christ wants to

accomplish in us and through us, to put aside our own expectations of who we think is important and instead place Jesus Christ at the core of everything we do. The voice of God is calling us and reminding us that our story isn't about us, it's about Jesus Christ; he is at work in our world, at work in our lives, and we are his servants, called to speak his word and share his love and celebrate the transformation that comes when we listen to his voice. Today, as we come to his table, as we celebrate his presence among us through his body and blood, may we know that Jesus Christ is here with us, that we are part of his story, and we are ready to listen, and to follow, everywhere he leads. Speak Lord, for your servants are listening. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen!