

1 Sam. 3:1–10

(11–20)

Ps. 139:1–6, 13–18

1 Cor. 6:12–20

John 1:43–51

Discerning God's Call

Goal for the Session *In light of Samuel's call, adults will ponder the ways we discern God's call today.*

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on 1 Samuel 3:1–10 (11–20)

WHAT is important to know?

— From "Exegetical Perspective," Richard Boyce

This passage stands at the beginning of the stories of kingship in Judah and Israel, a time when God's people grew weary with the occasional service of the judges who rescued them when their disobedience had made them prey to their enemies. Now Israel began to long for a king. From the beginning, this concentration of power in the hands of a human being was fraught with difficulty. Who will speak the truth to power? In this "nice little" story, a new office begins to emerge, preparatory to the later emergence of the king: the office of "trustworthy prophet of the LORD" (v. 20). Human speaking and hearing now become one of the main means by which the light of God's revelation breaks into the affairs of this world.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From "Theological Perspective," Joseph L. Price

To be called by God is an act of spiritual intimacy and divine urgency. To be called by God means that God knows one's name and, in knowing one's name, exercises a powerful influence on the person. To be called by God also indicates a need for immediate response because the Almighty has indeed summoned one to a specific vocation or course of action. The story of Samuel's call establishes his authority, empowers his transfer of priestly leadership from Eli to Saul, and reinforces hope in God—that God will refresh and renew.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From "Pastoral Perspective," Donna Schaper

What this passage recommends to us is that we begin to make decisions based on the tingle of hope. Oddly, the passage assures us that what God is going to do will make both ears tingle. Let one ear tingle with fear. Fear is legitimate under most of the circumstances of most of our lives. Fear is spiritually legitimate. A lot has gone wrong. A lot of danger lurks. But listen now with the other ear. Hear what Samuel was reluctant to hear: God is going to do a new thing, which will make both of our ears tingle.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From "Homiletical Perspective," Lawrence Wood

This comic, tender, tragic story really does come from modern life. In an age of divine reticence and the all-too-human failings of religious leaders, it speaks to every servant weighed down with fatigue or regret. Are we Samuel? Are we Eli? Can we really be sure which? And what shall we do if the living God comes into our troubled temple? It is Eli, ironically enough, who tells us what to say: "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening."

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

**1 Samuel 3:1–10
(11–20)**

Focus on Your Teaching

Most adults have struggled at times with discerning God's voice or God's call. How do your group members recognize God's voice amid the many voices clamoring for their attention? How do we interpret what we hear? The story of Samuel shows us a young boy seeking to discern God's call with the help of an aging mentor. Discerning and interpreting God's voice happens best in community, which is one reason your work as a Bible study leader is so important. It is not necessary to have all the answers, only to provide an opportunity for exploration and discernment in community.

God of wisdom, help me create a safe space among our group where your voice can be heard and your will discerned. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles (including several study Bibles)
- board or newsprint
- markers, pens
- copies of Resource Sheets 1, 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for January 21, 2018, unless it will be e-mailed to participants

For Responding

- option 1: board or newsprint and markers; words and music to the Taizé chant "Ubi caritas"
- option 2: board or newsprint and markers
- option 3: guests for panel discussion

For the activity using Resource Sheet 2, if the two groups are too large, encourage participants to form smaller groups within the two groups.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, if you are using option 3 in Responding, invite two or three guests to talk about how they view their vocations as callings from God. Fill them in on the content of this session. Ask them to talk about how they discerned their calling and how they see God at work in their vocations.

Gather in a circle and invite participants to play a game of voice recognition. Ask for a volunteer to close his or her eyes. Explain that you will point to another person in the circle, and that person will call out the name of the volunteer. The volunteer (with eyes still closed) will then try to guess who has called his or her name. Point to another person in the circle to do the same. Then ask for a new volunteer and start again. Discuss why some voices are more easily recognizable than others.

Introduce the focus of today's session, the story of Samuel being called by God, as an opportunity to consider how we discern God's voice today.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

God, you come to us in human words, both written and spoken. Open our ears to hear your call and our minds to discern your will. Amen.

EXPLORING

Plan for reading 1 Samuel 3:1–20 in parts. Ask for four volunteers to read the four voices in the story: the narrator, God, Samuel, and Eli. After the reading, discuss:

✪ What questions emerge from your hearing of the story?

Note that to understand what is happening in 1 Samuel 3 it is helpful to know what has happened in the first two chapters of 1 Samuel.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Background on Samuel and Eli) and pens. Form two groups. Instruct Group 1 to work on the “back story” of Samuel, and Group 2 to work on the “back story” of Eli and his sons.

After about five minutes, invite each group to report their findings to the whole group. Ask:
✿ What insights does this give you into what is happening in today's lectionary text?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on 1 Samuel 3:1–10 [11–20]). Ask a volunteer to read the “What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1 to shed light on the context of this story. Ask:
✿ Why does the prophetic office become necessary in Israel's history?

Read aloud the following quote:

The birth of this office [prophet of the Lord] is a cooperative affair. While Eli has failed to pass on faithfulness to his own flesh and blood, he now serves as a spiritual parent for his young charge, Samuel. Though Eli's eyes may be failing him, his knowledge of the Lord, and his experience of the revelation of God's word, are not. It takes both the attentiveness of young Samuel's ears and the wisdom of the old priest's heart and mind to birth this new office in the service of the Lord.

—*Excerpted from Richard Boyce, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 245.*

Ask the group to discuss the following:

- ✿ What significance do you find in the fact that Samuel does not discern his call alone, but needs help from Eli?
- ✿ What does this story suggest about how we discern God's voice?

Ask learners to read again the first message Samuel receives in his role as prophet (3:11–14). Invite them to discuss the following:

- ✿ What does this part of the story suggest about what it means to be called to speak for God?

Invite participants to form groups of two or three. Ask them to read the “Where?” “So What?” and “Now What?” excerpts on Resource Sheet 1 and to talk about insights gained or questions raised from these excerpts.

After about five or six minutes, gather the whole group together again and ask for volunteers to talk about their insights and questions. If there are questions remaining that require further research, decide who will follow up on this and report at the next session.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Hearing and Discerning God's Voice** Ask learners to name all the different ways God speaks today. Encourage them to think of churchly means (e.g., Scripture, preaching, sacraments, prayer, hymns, fellowship) as well as means from outside the church

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(e.g., nature, art, literature, film, science). List these on the board or newsprint. Ask participants to discuss the following:

- ✧ Where do you hear God's voice most consistently?
- ✧ How do you discern God's will when different voices seem to say different things?

Sing together the Taizé song "Ubi caritas" (Live in charity). The words say to live in charity and God will dwell in you.

2. **Speaking Truth to Power** Say: "Samuel is called to deliver a very uncomfortable message to Eli. Likewise many biblical prophets who follow him are called to deliver unpopular messages to the king, temple leadership, and people of Israel." Ask participants to form groups of two or three. Write the following questions on a board or newsprint for discussion in their small groups:

- ✧ Who are some contemporary prophets who have taken on the role of speaking truth to power?
- ✧ How do you discern which voices are authentic and trustworthy?
- ✧ Have you ever felt called to speak out about something, even though your message may not have been popular?
- ✧ If so, how did you discern this? How did it turn out?

Invite those willing to talk about their responses with the whole group.

3. **Panel Discussion: Exploring Vocation** Many adults think of being "called" in terms of religious vocations. Remind your group of the important Reformation insight that all of the baptized are called to serve God by serving their neighbors in various vocations, both within and outside the church. Introduce the guests and remind them of how much time they have to talk about their vocations. When each of the guests has spoken, open the conversation for questions and discussion from the group.

When inviting guests, remember that the concept of vocation includes more than jobs we are paid to do. Anything one does to serve one's neighbor, such as parenting or volunteer work, can be a vocation.

CLOSING

Encourage participants to be especially mindful in the coming week of the ways God speaks to them, and to come to the next session prepared to talk about their reflections on this. Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

Merciful God, thank you for calling each of us by name to be your people. Continually tune our hearing, that we would discern your voice in the midst of all the voices clamoring for our attention, and that we would respond faithfully, even when it is uncomfortable to do so. Give us courage and strength to follow where you lead. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for January 21, 2018, or e-mail it to learners during the week. Encourage them to read the focus scripture and the resource sheet before the next session.

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Background on Samuel and Eli



Group 1: Samuel

Explore the “back story” of Samuel by reading silently 1 Samuel 1:1–28 and 2:18–21.

Discuss together and be prepared to report to the whole group:

✠ How did Samuel come to live in the temple of the Lord at Shiloh?

✠ What is the significance of Samuel's name? (See notes in a study Bible.)



Group 2: Eli and His Sons

Explore the “back story” of Eli and his sons by reading silently 1 Samuel 2:11–17, 22–25.

Discuss together and be prepared to report to the whole group:

✠ What were the sins of Eli's sons?

✠ What were Eli's failings as a father and a priest?