

January 17, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: I Samuel 3:1–10

TITLE: Answering that Inner Call

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

This may sound like a science question, but it's actually a faith question: Is the world evolving and changing? Our immediate response is to say "Yes. Over time continents have moved and shifted. There have been eons of Ice Ages and times of heat waves. Some animals have thrived and then gone extinct, and now sadly more are dying off because of humans' destructive behavior." But consider the question again: "Is the stuff of the world evolving and changing?" Simon Morris is an evolutionary biologist and a person of faith. He reminds us that the building blocks of life, the stuff of this world, are not just physical. There is evolving physical nature and there is also evolving human nature. What if the ability to reason, to imagine future possibilities, and to care deeply for other creatures—what if those abilities also evolve and change over time?

We can visit the displays in the Carnegie Natural History Museum and see reconstructions of ancient dinosaurs and hominids that evolved into modern dogs, horses, and yes human beings. So imagine walking through the displays in the Carnegie Museum of Human History, if such a museum existed, and seeing displays that trace human moral evolution—that catalogued the development of weapons from spears to nuclear missiles but also traced the discoveries of antibiotics and vaccines. Imagine seeing exhibits that depicted slaves in ancient Egypt and Rome, slaves harvesting sugar in the West Indies or cotton here in America—but then a display that also catalogs the abolition of slavery, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As people of faith, we affirm that the eternal Creator God has shaped the development of Homo Sapiens. Shouldn't we also affirm that this same God is at work shaping the development of us as moral beings—as people evolving from more primitive moral views to more advanced, humane and righteous beliefs? And if so, how does God guide this process? How does God awaken us from our slumbers of imperfection and call us to better, higher ways of life?

None of us is at our best when we're awakened from a sound sleep. There's always an initial moment of befuddlement as we rub our eyes and toss back the covers trying to wake up. At home we have a skinny old Labrador who is now 15 years old. She can't see very well and has developed the pattern of barking at the backdoor when she needs to go out. That is well and good if we're watching TV after dinner; it's less endearing when we're sound asleep at 2 in the morning. But I suppose it serves a good and necessary purpose.

Now, as the bible story goes, the young boy Samuel was sound asleep in the temple of Shiloh. He heard his name called twice in the middle of the night. Startled, a bit confused, he ran to his master, Eli the high priest of the temple, and said "Here I am." Eli, also awakened from a sound sleep, sent the boy back to his mat, only to have this entire cycle repeated three more times. Only on the fourth go-round did Eli break the pattern and instruct Samuel to stay put and listen to whatever God was trying to tell him.

Samuel heard God's words—words that bode ill for his master Eli and the priesthood in ancient Israel. But Samuel took the words to heart and soon became the new spiritual leader of the Jewish nation.

This is the second story like this we've heard today. Earlier Juliette read from Acts 9 about Ananias being awakened by a vision in which God calls to him to go and visit Saul. Ananias is hesitant to do this because Saul's reputation as a persecutor of Christians is well-known. But he gets up and does what the Lord asked of him; and by his faithfulness, Saul's blindness is healed and he is re-baptized as Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ.

These are examples of inner calls—hearing a voice, having your conscience tweaked, sensing a new direction in your life and trusting that it is God-blessed. These calls are more than a gut instinct or inclination. They are deeper than that—a conviction, a knowledge that takes hold of your soul. Some people are gripped by this conviction when they realize how much they want to be a teacher, doctor, lawyer, social worker, or yes, a minister. Some people heed a call that tells them it's time to move to a new job, to say “Yes” to a relationship that is taking shape, or to step away from something that is destructive and move toward something that is life-giving. Now unlike Ananias and Samuel, you likely will not hear God literally speaking to you. But the same God who is at work in the physical evolution of the world is also at work in the moral and spiritual evolution of the world, including each one of us. God calls to us. God urges us to move forward, to step away from what's wrong and step toward what's right and just and life-giving. And God is persistent. Hey, take heart: If you answer God in less than four repetitions of God's call, you're doing better than Samuel—one of the wisest leaders of faith in the bible!

Our faith professes that God is guiding us toward a better future. God knows us completely and calls us to follow our spirits and seek what is good. But one caveat needs to be named as well. We like staying in our comfortable beds and sleeping through the night. We like going through our days in predictable routines, avoiding rocking the boat or making waves in the world around us. But evolution is by definition disruptive. To step forward by faith means stepping away from the way things are and moving toward the way God wants them to be. There's no getting around this fact.

Kwame Anthony Appiah is a noted philosophy professor who has taught at Yale, Harvard, and is now at NYU. He's said that when he's on an airplane and people find out he teaches philosophy, some ask him, “So, what is your philosophy of life?” To which he replies with a smile, “Everything is more complicated than you think.” See, the easy voices in life tell us that everything is just fine—just keep doing what you're doing, don't change a thing and everything will work out. But if the past weeks have taught us anything, it is that everything is not fine and a lot needs to change for things to turn out well. That's the difference between easy voices and prophetic voices—between the world's call to complacency and God's call to evolve and change.

Ananias heard a call that told him to care for a man committed to destroying Christian leaders. Samuel heard a call that included a message to Eli that he and his sons were destined to fall from power. When young Jeremiah received a call to be a prophet, God touched his mouth and said, “Today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms, to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer 1:10). And how many times did Jesus challenge the old ways of doing things, telling people “You have heard it said, ‘but today I say to you’”? (6x in Matthew 5)

Evolution—physical and spiritual evolution—means moving away from one way of doing things and moving toward a new way of life. It is complicated, as Professor Appiah says. It is daunting, as Samuel discovered. It is hard and troubling, as Jeremiah and Jesus made plain. But if we’re honest, and if we trust that God is at work in us for good, then answering these inner calls is always the right decision.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a speech in 1967 for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a portion of which we’ll hear after this sermon. In it he spoke about God expressing “divine dissatisfaction” and calling us to change. Divine dissatisfaction is very real. It is that part of our conscience that knows right from wrong, and is troubled when wrong prevails—when truth is corrupted by lies from high places—when standards of decency and justice are trampled upon like the rampaging rioters who overran the Capitol and whose rabid rhetoric has cast a pall over Wednesday’s inauguration celebration. It is the divine dissatisfaction when bureaucratic incompetence allows thousands to die daily from the coronavirus—when wealth is safeguarded by the few to the impoverishment of the many—when our souls ache for change, heavy with the dissatisfaction of unevolved, unenlightened laws and racist, unjust social systems.

But God is patient and persistent. God called to Samuel four times and is still calling to us. And the first step in change, in moral evolution, is to trust that call and pray the prayer of Samuel: “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.” We can say those words even when we’re weary and tired; we can say them when we’re concerned and confused. We can say them like King did that night he was awoken from a deep sleep by a racist death threat against himself and his family. King prayed at his kitchen table for clarity as his faith itself was shaken. Then he heard God respond, “*Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And I will be with you.*”

The stuff of this universe—both physical and moral—is evolving toward God’s kingdom goals. As I mentioned last week, we are called to push back the powers of chaos and injustice to create a space for order, justice, equality, truth, and a peace that passes all understanding. And as I’ve said today, we are called to quiet ourselves and then offer the prayer after the example of Samuel and Ananias and Martin Luther King—saying, “Speak, O God, your servant is listening.” By taking that step, we move forward by faith and the horizon of the realm of God draws that much closer to reality. Thanks be to God!

AMEN