

# A Word In Your Ear

1 Samuel 3:1-10

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

10 January 2010

I was working in my home office one day last week when I heard Evelyn shout upstairs, “Yes, what is it?”

I replied, “What is what?”

She said, “You called me and I was just wondering what you wanted.”

“No, I didn’t call you,” I responded, “You must be hearing things.”

“You certainly did call me,” she said, “I distinctly heard you say my name.”

“Maybe it was like Samuel in the Bible,” I suggested, “Maybe it was God that was calling you.”

“Well, if it was,” she replied in that “I’m-going-to-have-the last word” tone of voice. “If it was God calling me, he must have a Scottish accent.”

And she thought she was telling me something I didn’t know!

That is a wonderful story, isn’t it, of Samuel as a boy in the Temple? Hearing someone call his name. Going through three times to Eli, being sent back to his bed, before it dawns on the old man that the call to Samuel is coming from a higher authority.<sup>1</sup>

It’s amazing how many and various are the kinds of people God calls. The unlikeliest of the unlikely. Who would ever have thought, when God had so many choices in the days of ancient Israel, that he would have called someone as young and inexperienced in life as Samuel?

But not only does God call the most unexpected of people to carry out his plans in this world, it’s surprising also the many different ways and means he has of calling them.

In his book, *In the Eye of the Storm*, Max Lucado tells how, during high school years, he worked laying pipe in a Texas oil field. At lunchtime the workers would gather together to play cards and tell jokes. The air was usually blue with foul language and even worse stories.

One day, during their break, a supervisor walked towards the workers.

“Uh, fellows,” he said. The workers turned and looked up at him. “I, uh, just wanted, uh, to invite . . .,” he stuttered.

Then he tried again, “I just wanted to tell you our church is having a service tonight and if you . . .”

“What?” Max thought to himself, “He’s talking church? Out here? With us?”

The supervisor continued, “I just wanted to invite any of you to come along.” And immediately turned on his heel and left.

There was a silence among the workers. No one said anything. Then they all began to laugh at the man’s obvious embarrassment.

Max says that he forgot about all this until some 5 years later when, for no apparent reason, he began to think

deeply about that incident and realised how impressed he was with his supervisor on the oil field. His courage. His deep faith. How that’s man’s love for God had been greater than his concern for his reputation. And as Max thought about it, more and more he came to understand that God had been speaking to him in his subconscious all these years, calling him to be a Christian and become part of his church. “So,” says Lucado, “I listened to what God was saying to me. I came home. I came home to church.”<sup>2</sup> And, ever since, the church has been giving thanks to God for calling this man who has become such a blessing to so many people. Max Lucado is now one of the world’s most widely read Christian authors, bringing many to faith and helping many others to understand what it is they believe.

Yes, God calls a wide variety of unlikely people to his cause in the world. And he calls them in so many different ways. For some, such as Max Lucado, the call is delayed and indirect, transmitted through a third party and taking years to make its mark. For others, though the divine call is a much more immediate experience with God speaking in a more straightforward way. As was the case with the young boy, Samuel, in the Temple. When he went to live and study in the temple at Shiloh as the protégé of the old priest, Eli, God spoke to him with great immediacy and urgency because it was a time of great moral decay and national uncertainty. He challenged Samuel, despite his youth, to give that spiritual leadership the high priest, Eli, and his sons were failing to provide because of the old man’s advancing years and the sons’ self-interest and fraudulent lifestyle.<sup>3</sup> God called Samuel with great urgency because he needed him to prepare to take over spiritual leadership of the Israelites at a critical juncture in their history.

Now, though that incident may have happened thousands of years ago, God still speaks to people today with a similar immediacy. And this call comes not in a general way, but personally. God always calls people individually. Just as he called Samuel by name, just as the Good Shepherd in John’s Gospel called his own sheep by name, so God calls us today.<sup>4</sup> He always uses our first name because he knows us and loves us as the unique human beings that he created us to be. He addresses us – John ... Jean ... Robert ... Mary, or whatever our name may be – and calls us to follow him and serve him.

Now, when God calls us and we respond in faith, one of the great and wonderful things he does is to give us an inner peace above and beyond anything we have previously experienced. This is something we don’t always receive because, being so used to trusting in ourselves, we are prone to panic and anxiety – a state of mind that blocks out the gift of peace God is trying to give us. But when we learn to trust in God, things can be so different.

In the *Upper Room* devotional magazine, Ruth

Andrews tells of a decision she had to make a few years ago at a point in her life when she was very unsure what to do. She wasn't making enough as a substitute teacher for her ordinary living expenses and was faced with moving out of the home she loved. In the midst of dread and confusion about her future she came across the words from the Bible that read, "Be still and know that I am God."<sup>5</sup> Suddenly, she realised, though she believed in God, she wasn't really trusting him and her panic was preventing her from hearing what he was saying to her. "By stopping to listen for God's voice," she says, "I learned how to be calmer in the storm."<sup>6</sup>

Oh, the great spiritual gifts we can receive when we respond in trust to God's call! Oh, the great ways in which we can be helped when we wait on God, when we are still and listen to him calling each one of us, personally, by name!

Not only, though, does God give us his peace when he calls us. In another ways, he also disturbs our peace. He upsets our fixed ways of thinking so he can get he get our listening ear and command our undivided attention for those things he cares most about – his suffering people in today's world.

There is an article in the current edition of *The Presbyterian Record* that has greatly disturbed my peace of late. It concerns an action by our government in Ottawa that is even more serious than the proroguing of parliament.

Along with a dozen other churches and religious bodies in Canada, the Presbyterian Church has for many, many years been part of an ecumenical justice coalition called Kairos<sup>7</sup> which works in different parts of the world – Africa, Asia, Central and South America as well as here in Canada – for poverty relief, support for orphans and abused women, human rights, aboriginal rights and environmental advocacy, working. In the Middle East, "Kairos has partnered with Jewish, Muslim and Christian peacemaking and development organisations. They have included groups providing primary care health clinics in Gaza, safe places for abused street children in Beirut, a facility for mentally challenged children in the Bekaa valley, advocates for democracy in Palestine and Jewish and Arab women in Israel who try to build bridges in civil society."<sup>8</sup>

Over all these years, Kairos has received matching funding for its projects from CIDA, (the Canadian International Development Agency), to the tune of \$7 million. But this year the funding has been abruptly cut by the Conservative Government which says that Kairos's work no longer fits with their priorities. The truth of the matter would seem to be more astounding. The reason for the cut-off in funding is because of allegations of anti-Semitism made against the Kairos group which has been critical of Israel's harsh treatment of the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. Jason Kenny, the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multi-Culturalism, who made these allegations about Kairos in a recent speech, has been misguidedly led to thinking that any criticism of Israel is by definition anti-Semitic.<sup>9</sup>

Now many people might shrug their shoulders at such a decision and say, "That's just politics. Nothing we can do. Let's move on." But to those of us who are called by God, who are called to care and called to serve, this should truly disturb our peace because we realise the end result is that thousands and thousands of suffering and disadvantaged people are going to be affected negatively by this denial of funding. We who are called cannot just turn away because we hear God speaking in our ear and reminding us that it's how we treat these people – our global neighbours, God's children – that really matters most at the end of the day. As Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel, "What you do to these, the least of my people, you are really doing to me."<sup>10</sup>

Yes, I believe God is speaking to each and every one of us today, as surely as he spoke to Samuel in years gone by. He is addressing us by name, calling us away from our secular distractions and busyness, asking that we pay attention to the really important things of life. He certainly has calming words to help us find peace amidst our many personal concerns and anxieties. But he also has disturbing words to confront us about our world's most deep-seated problems and needs.

So let's listen carefully! God is speaking to us. And what he has to say will not only make a radical difference in our individual lives, it will also have a wider impact. For the long term good of our whole world. And, most importantly, for the least of all its people.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Samuel 2:1-10

<sup>2</sup> Max Lucado, *In The Eye of the Storm; a Day in the Life of Jesus* [Word Books, July 1991]

<sup>3</sup> Samuel 2:12ff

<sup>4</sup> John 10:3

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 46:10

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Andrews, *The Upper Room*, ca. January 1999, [www.upperroom.org](http://www.upperroom.org)

<sup>7</sup> Kairos Canada [www.kairoscanada.org](http://www.kairoscanada.org)

<sup>8</sup> David Harris, "Restore Kairos's Funding", *The Presbyterian Record*, Jan 1, 2010

<sup>9</sup> Les Whittington, "'Anti-Semitic' charge angers aid group", *The Toronto Star*, 18 December 2009

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 25:40