

“Are you Called?”
I Samuel 3:1-10
January 15, 2012

Oxford don C. S. Lewis was a resolute atheist. That may come as a surprise for some who know him through his great apologetics, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Screwtape Letters* and *Mere Christianity*. But it is true. In his book *Surprised by Joy* Lewis makes clear that he was quite comfortable in his atheism. Not only didn't he “find God,” he wasn't even looking. God, Lewis says, found him. “Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about ‘man's search for God.’ To me, as I was then, they might as well have talked about the mouse's search for the cat.”

Michael Lindvall notes that people speculate about the ‘search for God’ as if the Divine were a set of misplaced car keys. The journey of faith is not so much to ‘find God,’ as it is a struggle to follow a God who finds us.

From the beginning of the covenant relationship with Israel, it is the people who are “chosen” by God to articulate God's purposes and not the other way around.

That's the story in Samuel's call. God called to Samuel, not once, not twice, not even three times, but only on the fourth time, does Samuel fully realize God is calling him. And even then, it took the coaching of another, Eli, for Samuel to comprehend the call.

It is not surprising that it takes awhile for Samuel to comprehend the call. As Lawrence Wood notes the text opens with a modern feeling, “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions

were not widespread.” So the story is placed in a time not unlike ours; we have passed the age of miracles. After this there are no pillars of fire, no columns of smoke, no parting of seas or rivers. What follows is a worldly history of successes and defeats, and palace intrigue. “In fact, Samuel's ultimate role is to anoint human kings which will give people further independence from God.

Yet God's light has not gone completely out. And as dim as the sound of God's call may be, God still calls.

Think too, of the call Jesus gave to his disciples. When he found them, not one of them was at prayer in the synagogue. They were not searching for God; they were at their nets and counting tables and happy to be right where they were, searching for a living.

The apostle Paul was not on a quest for deeper spiritual meaning when he got knocked up side the head and thrown blind to his knees by the voice of Jesus. He was on his way to Damascus to uphold the status quo against some nettlesome followers of Jesus.

18th century hymn writer and preacher John Newton had run away to sea as a boy and grew to make a fortune in the horrors of the slave trade. He was no religious “quester.” In a chance reading of Thomas a Kempis' devotional classic, *The Imitation of Christ*, that disquieted him and called out to him.

It lead to faith, ministry, work to abolish the slave trade and several thousand hymns. With one exception, few of those hymns are sung today. But that one has become the most popular in the English-speaking world: “Amazing Grace, how

sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost, but now am found; was blind but now I see.”

Finally, Francis Thompson eloquently makes the point when he named God “The Hound of Heaven” in poem of the same name:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him; and under running laughter.
Up visited hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fear
From those strong Feet that followed,
followed after.*

I bring all this up because for the past five months the nominating committee has been working diligently to prepare a slate of elder nominations. When the committee began the process it had 55 different names suggested by you, the congregation and the committee itself, plus a file box filled with notes on those asked in prior years, and of course the list of those who have served previously.

They began a process of discerning whom the Holy Spirit was calling to serve and then they began to contact folks. It is at that point that the process starts to sound a bit like the young Samuel who can't quite make out who is calling him!

The committee is almost finished with its work. They have done stellar work and have put in many, many hours of faithful service to the church.

But they are not quite there yet. It is a difficult task in a church where something close to 85% has previously served on session. Add to that the frenetic pace most households endure in our society.

With such facts you can guess the two most frequent responses the committee hears when someone declines the call, and I paraphrase: “I’ve got too much on my plate,” or “I’ve served before and it’s time for younger folks to step up.”

Those are valid responses. So how do we solve the challenge of church leadership when much of our congregation has aged and most folks are over burdened with the schedules they keep.

Frankly I don't yet know all the answers, but this much I do know, Bon Air Presbyterian Church is a vital witness in this community and God is most active here. The “Hound of Heaven” continues to call and pursue us. But in the case of serving in leadership roles such as session, do we keep running away?

Like others called before us, we must discern how God is calling us. And as in many cases, probably change how we go about our business. As currently practiced, session work can be tedious, long and burdensome. The tradition we, as other churches have been using of top down leadership is hard to maintain in our current age.

A few years ago the same challenge was met by shrinking the size of the session. But all the same program responsibilities were kept. That meant fewer people to do the same programs tasks, the system itself was not changed.

Instead of approaching the work of the church as done by the session or various committees, we need to flatten out our work. Rather than a vertical hierarchy where the session examines every minutia of detail before a ministry is blessed or deleted as part of Bon Air's ministry, we must recognize that the ministry is of Bon Air Presbyterian Church rests on the call of God to each life that is a part of our community of faith; yours and mine, and yours and yours. You, at any age, and with any schedule.

Dick Halverson, former chaplain of the U.S. Senate said it this way:

“The maximum impact of the church of Jesus Christ in history in the world is not the impact of great and eloquent preachers, or denominations, or church hierarchies, or even popes, or priests, or cardinals, or all of the programs that the church invented. The maximum impact of the church of Jesus Christ is the influence of the aggregate of believers where they are between Sundays.

“The measure of the effectiveness of a local church is not when the sanctuary is full on Sunday morning, and the programs are in operation. The measure of the effectiveness of the church is what's happening when the sanctuary is empty, the parking lot is empty, and the programs are not in operation, and people are scattered all over a metropolitan area, penetrating all of the organizations and institutions of that area, because where they are Christ is – in them. You are the church.”

With tools such as small group gatherings for peace discussions, interfaith conversations, Bible study,

homebound communion, discipleship-making, spiritual development, and more, we will reach Halverson's vision of a congregation called by God, not to gather here, but out there. Such ministry enables the ministry of others, of everyone. 500 hundred years ago Luther illuminated the concept of the “priesthood of all believers.”

Unfortunately our modern hierarchical management style has insisted on a priesthood of clergy and session.

In changing our model of leadership from facility and program management to ministry enabling leadership at all levels will be possible and much less burdensome. I'm not sure of all that it will or could look like, but as God did with Samuel, my sense is God is doing a new and good thing with BAPC.

Please keep the nominating committee in your prayers as they conclude their work, and keep your eyes and ears open as Lent approaches and we develop new ways to discern God's claim on our ministries.