



**Called by Name**

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1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1: 43-51

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Samuel, Philip, Nathanael, each called by name in different setting, and varied contexts. Those first three times Samuel is called neither he nor Eli recognize the One whose voice is calling. Perhaps it's not surprising, after all the passage opens telling us that "the word of God was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." Only after the third time does Eli recognize it for what it is - God calling. Then Eli knows what to do, how to instruct Samuel. Through Eli, Samuel learns how to listen for, how to recognise God.

What is it that makes a person receptive to God? For Samuel to be receptive is self-evident, he was dedicated from before conception to the service of God, maternal promise made and kept. Even so he still had to learn what this meant in his life and time, how to translate this in real life, how to listen, respond then enact God's word.

Then the gospel, there's a lot of finding and telling, coming and going happening here. Having decided to go to Galilee, Jesus finds Philip and says to him "Follow me." Has Jesus been looking for him? Why Philip? Perhaps it's random, except for the almost immediate Nathanael episode. Philip finds Nathanael, tells of finding Jesus, urges him to "Come and see." Jesus' greeting of Nathanael causes Nathanael to exclaim, "Where did you come to know me?"

The whole exchange is rather odd. The sequence of events suggests more than random meet ups are going on here. It's as if something's being recognized in them deeper than just a name. They're known, they're named, called to step into who and what God sees in them.

Sure, we know these accounts are told looking back, part of a tradition that tells history in a certain way, with particular characters and events. We're aware the gospel authors wanted to make a point about Jesus and those who were disciples. Even so each one called by name had to choose whether to respond and how. Their choice changed them, changed the shape of the faith story we tell.

Samuel, Jesus, Philip and Nathanael knew the religious tradition they of which they were a part. Samuel needed Eli to identify the voice Samuel heard as God's and to know then what to do. However, Samuel had from birth walked within a particular way, understood the world with God shaped in a particular way, in it. I wonder, if you've only distantly or tangentially heard of faith or God possibility, or haven't heard of God as possible, or credible, much less of a God who speaks, would you hear your name being called?

Is a sense of God, of greater presence native to being human, or is it something we learn through religious influence? Some years ago in an article in the NZ Herald John Roughan told this story:

"Many years ago on a guided tour of the Soviet Union I remarked on a Western-style cathedral in Riga. The Baltic republics had never been converted to the eastern orthodoxy of the rest of the Russian empire.

My guide immediately stopped the car and cheerfully asked if I would like to look inside.

I followed him up the steps and through the doors where I stopped abruptly but he didn't.

There were people in the pews. There was a service going on. I did what I think the vast majority of people, religious or not, would do.

But he didn't. He swept up the aisle with the pleased air of a safari guide who has had the good luck to bring you to a water hole and find a harmless herd using it.

He was practically at the altar rail before he looked around. The beam on his face turned to blank surprise as it registered I was not at his shoulder.

He came back to tell me it was quite OK to walk about. And it was true, the people at prayer had not visibly stirred at the intrusion. Clearly they were used to it.

He made another foray forward and this time when he looked back to see me still rooted to the floor he realised it was no-go.

Returning to the car he was not at all embarrassed.

"I am a communist," he said as though I'd asked for an explanation. He said it without a trace of antagonism. He was simply telling me that whatever I had seen in there was totally invisible to him."

The difference between us and that Russian guide John concluded was that the Russian's social conditioning had given him no spiritual experience whatsoever. A church service was no more sacred to him than a sport he didn't follow or a folk custom he found quaint.

Is John accurate in his conclusion that the human capacity to encounter spiritual experience is result of social conditioning? There are many who propose God is merely an idea, a prop for those who need such thing, an unproveable support for those too weak to make their own way in life. I mean what use is God? Especially if you consider things exist for your use, value them according to their usefulness to you, see the world as a place you take from at your will or want. Curiously it's only from a familiarity **with** God that such proposition can be raised.

The idea of spiritual experience as an outcome of social conditioning raises interesting questions. If you don't know of God, haven't been raised in a context where the notion of God's part of your world, does it mean there's no such thing as God or that a person can't have sense of that which we name God? Or is that more that **we've** come to determine what can be named God experience and therefore who can know of it and who cannot? Goodness me, imagine if the divine were left unbounded to overflow in abundance. Does God require humans to be paying attention to have life, shape and meaning?

Abraham Heschel suggests Adam's hiding from God after eating the forbidden fruit was more grave than Adam eating it in the first place. "'Where are you?'" is the first question that occurs in the Bible. ... It is we who hide," Heschel suggests, "who flee, who have an alibi." It's we who exile God. "God is less rare than we think. ... It's we who conceal God. ... God is waiting to be revealed, to be admitted to our lives. ... Our task is to open our souls to God, to let God again enter our deeds. ... Life is a hiding place for God. We are never apart from God who's in need of us."<sup>1</sup>

Our faith story tells that God gifts us life and the freedom to use that gift as we will. In and through our life God seeks us, calls us, desires to meet and be met by us. We have freedom to exile God from our life. That we are here in this place suggests that we, each in our own way, with greater or lesser willingness depending on the day, are willing for God to be alive in us. At times we conceal ourselves from the God who sees us as we are and calls us to enter in to living fully. This seems the nature of being human. But maybe today we choose not to exile God. Today we choose to take our part in expressing the richness of God whose hiding place is life. Each time we do choose for this we grow in confidence to express this as is it is in us, to recognise the divine, God, being expressed in ways we may least expect and to celebrate and join ourselves to that.

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<sup>1</sup> Heschel, A. (1951). *Man is not alone*. New York. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 153-154