

## The boy who said, "Here I am."

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1 Samuel 3:1-20  
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Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord...  
Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!"  
And Samuel said, "Here I am!"...  
"Speak for your servant is listening."  
Then the Lord said to Samuel,  
"See, I am about to do something in Israel..."

"Here I am." You're going to have to bear with me this morning, for I plan to talk only about these three words, "Here I am." That's Samuel responding to God's call; and it's the beginning of Samuel's life-long activity as a prophet, with the power to make and dispose of Israel's kings. But there was a cost to this good, for Samuel never had a family, never had children, and for an ancient Israelite that was an immeasurable cost. And when Abraham responded to God's call, saying, Here I am, he heard God say, miserably heard God say, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering. So being chosen by God, surely a good thing, comes with a cost. The young Moses also discovered the cost of saying, Here I am, Lord, when he stood before a burning bush. For Moses was working as a shepherd for his father in law, having a family, leading a nice, safe, secure life, only to hear God say, "I will send you to Pharaoh — you, Moses, a little shepherd, just married, — I'm sending you to that mighty, dictator, Pharaoh, to bring the Israelites, my people, out of Egypt." Not great news to Moses. And, "Here I am, send me," are the young Isaiah's words, in response to a vision of God and the angels, and hearing God's call ... and then finding himself committed to a forty, fifty year ministry of calling God's judgment down on Israel for her injustices. Here I am, to put it mildly, are consequential words, costly words, to the life of the person who speaks them, for once they are spoken, the hearer has committed himself, herself, to God's wants, and that call is not just for the moment, but is always looking forward; it's a commitment into the future. So to say, here I am, is to open one's soul to God, to let God's hopes enter into you. Best to be careful, then, before we say, Here I am, to God's call. Of course, these Old Testament tales, these stories of Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, are talking extremely, talking in an absolute sense, and they find their New Testament parallel in the lives of Jesus, Peter, Stephen and Paul, all of whom opened themselves to God's call; and all of them — for all the joy they found in living their lives under that call — all of them experienced the cost of that call, all their lives came to a premature end.

Fortunately, what I'm talking about here is not the whole of faith. We can think of it as the heavy end of the faith spectrum. For faith is like a two ended pole. We hear the other end of the faith pole when Jesus tells us, "my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Also a true word, perhaps even more true than the heavy word, And I say that even though we know that Jesus, at the end, as he senses his coming death, finding himself in anguish, prays to God "take this cup from me." So faith has a long spectrum, ending in contradictory poles. Faith is easy, its burden light; faith is demanding, its burden costly. It's a contradiction, but it's only a logical contradiction, not an existential contradiction. I mean that the sentences, the words, on each end of the pole are in contradiction to each other, but those words are true to existence, for existence, the way we experience life, is full of contradictory elements, So contradiction is an existential truth. I would argue that the very profundity of a Biblical faith lies in its recognition of the contradictory character of life — and we see this everywhere in scripture, in her very opening pages, where God declares every element of the creation good, and yet in the first story we are told of a devious, lying serpent, tempting the first people into disobedience to God, and in the second story of brother killing brother. Paul notes this contradiction in himself when he talks of opposing laws in his being, opposing elements, famously exemplified when he says, "I do not do the good I would; as opposed, say, to Socrates, arguably the founder of Western philosophy, who held that evil arises from ignorance. I love the Socratic dialogues, but on this score, I'll take Paul's profundity any day. Think of the readings from John's gospel that we have been hearing these past weeks. Again and again, John tells us that just believing

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that Jesus is the Son of God will give us salvation; and then, again and again, John tells us that our faith is not true unless we are obedient to Jesus' call to love all God's children, reminding us of Jesus' statement that we are especially to love our enemies. As if that's even a possibility for us. I think of an old friend of mine, a faithful Presbyterian from her childhood, despairingly crying out to me in letter after letter, that as a Christian she knows she should love Trump but she cannot do so. What could I say to her. I reminded her of Paul's words, I do not do the good I would. We live with this contradiction in our life of faith, and give thanks that we live under a merciful God. I am not through with these contradictions, there's one more, for there is a contradiction in the act of faith itself. I think of a divorced woman in her late forties, who had lived her adult life devoted to her only child, and now that child, at sixteen, was stricken by a fatal illness, and died. She told me this, years ago, when I was still teaching in a Presbyterian seminary, and then she said, how could this happen, how could God do this, how could God allow this, I've been a faithful Christian all my life, a church goer, why didn't God protect my child, I never thought this kind of thing could happen. Of course, I didn't say to her, "How can you say you never thought this could happen, don't you read the papers, watch the news, terrible things happen to people of faith all the time, terrible things happen to children: children die from cancer, from school shootings, from car crashes, from the devastation of war. Of course, I didn't say that, for I know only too well why we people of faith talk as this woman talks. For we know, with all our heart we know, that God is good, that God loves us, cares for us, that we live in God's creation, so it seems like, feels like, such an anomaly, such a horrific anomaly, when evil strikes, so the words just spring to our lips, how could this happen to us, how could God allow it, why didn't God protect us. And we say this even when we know that God did not do any of these evils, that illness comes out of the vulnerability of our bodies, and when its human brutality, we know, for a host of reasons, none of them good, that this is what we humans do to each other, for a host of reasons, none of them good, and we do these brutal things despite God seeking to draw us to good.

I say we know God is good, we know it in faith, but we also know this: that there is much in this world of ours that threatens our faith, that undoes our faith, that it's hard sometimes to believe in God, let alone a good God, not only because of the sheer weight of human suffering, especially when the suffering afflicts those we love, but all of us know that the scientific pursuit of knowledge has no need for a divine reality to account for the nature of the universe. We know this, our faith knows this, we live with it, and sometimes the weight of that knowledge overwhelms our faith and destroys it. I see this not only in others, but in my own family; only one of my three children has been able to maintain her faith through adulthood. I understand that loss of faith, for I feel the weight of all the arguments and the experiences that destroy faith. But by God's grace, we can withstand those threatening arguments. And when I say this, I think of something the German philosopher Nietzsche said. What doesn't destroy you, he said — meaning the evils, the pain, the suffering in life — what doesn't destroy you, makes you stronger. And I found that true in my own life, and I think that's true for our faith. If our faith is not destroyed by all that argues against it, our faith grows stronger. It grows stronger by God's grace, God's unconditional gift to us. And here perhaps is where Jesus telling us, that God's yoke is easy, comes to the fore. For when we stand before God and say, Here I am Lord, speak, for your servant is listening, what we hear, without any reservation, without any conditions, (what we hear) is the love of God, that we are "God's beloved. We are the beloved of what is deepest and eternal in reality, and that gives us meaning and purpose and vitality in life, and the strength to affirm the goodness of life, the joy of life, despite the evils, the brutality, the cruelty that so marks human life.

So sisters and brothers in Christ, let us close with a, Here I am, Lord, or rather a, Here we are, Lord, here we are, standing before you in your house of worship, your beloved community, opening ourselves to your spirit, speak Lord, for we are listening, we are listening. Amen.