



**“What’s on Your Resume?”**

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I Samuel 3:1-12 (NRSV)***

One of the jobs that I had during the summer between my sophomore and junior year in college was working as a job search coach at a nonprofit organization that contracted with government entities for the purpose of matching welfare recipients with companies that were seeking new employees.

Most of the clients with whom I worked had not yet graduated high school or completed a GED. Some were considered partially disabled. Some were “displaced homemakers.” Others were people with criminal records. The hardest people to place were ex-cons, most of whom had little education and limited employment experience.

As an employment coach, I worked both sides of the employment equation. I helped job seekers write resumes, follow job leads, and prepare for interviews with prospective employers. On the employer side, I taught bosses how to assess their eligibility and apply for tax benefits for hiring my company’s clients.

The most challenging part of my job was not convincing employers to hire our clients. (They were often desperate for workers and my clients were a good risk, because my company provided supports that increased the likelihood of success for everyone.) So the most challenging part of my job wasn’t convincing the employers to make the hires, it was convincing the clients that they had God-given talents, and that they could get and keep a job and make a meaningful contribution to society. Any sense of vocation that they had had at one time had been drilled out of them at a young age, if that sense had ever been nurtured in the first place.

I only held the job coach position for a few months, but the lessons that I learned from this experience were as valuable as any that I learned in my college social work classes.

One lesson that I learned, and that I have continued to reflect on over the years, is that many people—even people who grow up with more privilege than my clients—often struggle to believe that they have particular gifts and a particular calling in life, which makes embracing their calling all the more challenging.

Over the years, I've seen the latent effects of deprivation and feelings of incompetence reinforced in individuals and whole groups of people, as these early experiences in life are compounded over time by the effects of racism, classism, homophobia, and the like.

## II

Despite these circumstances that may deter and detract from a person's sense of self-worth and vocation, the Bible is resplendent with examples of people who, like my job coach clients, had a hard time believing that they were called to something special in life and that they were (and are) worthy of their respective calling.

Many of these biblical examples were people, like my clients years ago, and like the boy, Samuel, in today's scripture lesson, who had what head hunters call "weak resumes." Furthermore, they lacked the social status and social relationships that might have otherwise escalated them to more prominent roles with less effort than was otherwise required of them. In short, Samuel, and many others like him, did not have the resume or the pedigree that was needed for their jobs.

So who was Samuel?

Samuel was the little boy, who God called in the night, "Samuel, Samuel." Right? We all know that. But there's more.

Samuel was the firstborn child of Elkanah (el-kay' nah) and Hannah. His father had two wives, the first was Hannah, and the second was Peninnah (pe-nin' uh.)

Elkanah and his second wife, Peninnah, had many children, but he had no children—until Samuel was born—with his first wife, Hannah, who had been barren for many years.

Hannah's infertility challenged her sense of identity as a woman, and brought her future and her welfare into question. If Hannah were unable to conceive and raise a child—particularly a son—and if her husband preceded her in death, then Hannah's welfare would be dependent upon whether her brothers-in-law were willing to provide for her. If they were not, she would be left to beg.

Hannah prayed fervently that she would be able to have a healthy child. As an act of devotion, she participated fully in the annual pilgrimages to Shiloh, Israel's national shrine. At Shiloh, she vowed that if she could conceive and bear a son, she would dedicate that son to a "nazarite life," which was a life of religious devotion and strict practices. Nazarites, for example, abstained from drinking alcohol, cutting their hair, and

touching human corpses.<sup>1</sup> (The first two prohibitions are no surprise to most of us, I suspect. The last one is a bit peculiar.)

As the story goes (in I Samuel), Hannah's prayers were answered. She conceived and bore a son, and she named him "Samuel," which means, "He who is from God."

When Samuel was weaned (probably around age two or three), she fulfilled her promise to God by taking him to Shiloh, presented him to Eli, the High Priest, and offered him up to God as a servant in the Temple.

Under the tutelage of Eli, Samuel was called by God to be a prophet in Israel and a bridge between two kinds of leaders, the Judges and the Kings.

Samuel was called to prophecy during a time of rapid growth, cultural change, and a turbulent transition in leaders. Few would have sought his job, and even fewer would have seen him as adequately credentialed and for this role.

For example, his predecessors, the Judges, were mature men, who had been raised by their fathers to fill these roles, and who passed on their mantles to their sons when they could no longer serve or when they died. The Judges were trained and skilled in protecting Israel against external threats, and leading their army in battle.

Eli was a Judge. Therefore, he was expected to train his sons to follow in his footsteps, and he was expected to pass on the mantle of leadership to them.

At the time that Samuel was called to follow Eli, Eli's sons (Hophni and Phinehas) were of an age and at a training level to do so.

Samuel, by contrast, was not Eli's son. He was still a youth and he lacked political and military training and experience.

Despite his deficits, Samuel represented a fresh alternative to Hophni and Phineas, who (read the historical fine print) lacked the moral turpitude to fill the role. They were wicked men (I Samuel 2:12), who were known to be womanizers and self-interested cheats.

So, God interceded in Israel's conventional judicial succession plan. God ditched Hophni and Phineas and, instead, called the boy, Samuel, to serve in their place.

God chose someone with, in theory, the wrong credentials. Samuel was the wrong age, he had the wrong pedigree, and he didn't have the requisite training to lead the nation.

So it is no surprise that he did not quickly embrace his calling, or that Eli did not immediately recognize and affirm it. Eventually, however, they both got the message

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<sup>1</sup> C.f., Numbers 6:1-21, Judges 13:5 and 7, and Paul Achtmier, *The Harper's Bible Dictionary*. (HarperCollins: San Francisco, 1985) pp. 689-690.

that he was being called. Eli correctly interpreted that calling. Samuel accepted it. God blessed it. And the nation flourished.

Despite his seemingly limited qualifications, the prophet Samuel presided over the “Golden Age” of Ancient Israel. He was just who was needed at this important time of national change. And he defended his people in battle, and anointed the two most important kings in the history of Ancient Israel, Saul and David.

### III

Despite what formal and informal structures exist in our culture today that contribute to or detract from some people’s ability to secure employment and rise to the top, and that hold others back, the call of Samuel in the history books of Israel and numerous other call narratives found throughout the scriptures, serve as a reminder that God has always called and claimed unlikely people with unconventional credentials to fulfill God’s purposes and plan, perhaps most especially in turbulent times.

Other biblical examples of unlikely callings include the following:

- God called **Abraham and Sarah**, Hebrew migrants, in their old age, and God promised to make of their descendants a great nation—even more than the sands on the beach.
- God called **Ruth and Naomi**, who banded together after their husbands died and who formed a new kind of family even though they were from different nations, and owed nothing to each other. Together, they carved out a new future and a new hope for themselves as they overcame despair and deprivation, and became a model of faithful solidarity for Jews and Christians alike.
- God called **Jeremiah**, a country boy, to be a prophet in Jerusalem, the capital city, and to go and speak truth to power, and make them listen.
- God called **Mary and Joseph** to raise **Jesus**, who became a peasant king, and who called fisher people, tax collectors, orphans, widows, prostitutes, and the like, to be his disciples.
- God called **Paul**, a man who had been a Pharisee, and a self-proclaimed enemy of the gospel, to be an apostle and one of the most important leaders of the early Christian community.
- God called **Timothy**, perhaps the youngest apostle in biblical times, to lead a new generation of Christians and to take the gospel to the hinterlands of the Roman world and beyond.

Samuel's call and response, and the call and responses of Abraham and Sara, Ruth and Naomi, the prophet Jeremiah, the Holy Family, the apostles, and many others—known and unknown to us—in scripture, in history, and in these later days—have been called and claimed by God, not because they had conventional credentials, but because God had a plan and a purpose for them, and God had a way of preparing and developing them to fulfill their callings.

The Apostle Paul explained this phenomenon to the Corinthians in his first letter to them (I Cor. 2: 26–31) where he wrote these words:

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

#### IV

Given the preponderance of biblical evidence that God calls and works in and through unlikely people, this news puts us on notice that thinking small and sticking with convention probably isn't the way that God envisions any of our vocations, or any of our futures.

Furthermore, the voice that we may be hearing in the night may very well be the voice of God, and the letter of engagement about our individual and collective futures is already prepared.

Our task, then, may have less do with getting our resumes ready and preparing for interviews, and more to do with discerning our particular calling and trusting that God will shape us into the type of leaders who are needed for the future and the wellbeing of our community, much like God called and shaped the prophet Samuel. Amen.