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1 Samuel 3:1-10

Rev. Katya Brodbeck - Powell United Methodist Church

”Here I am, Lord”

“Faith is a place of mystery, where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see and the strength to let go of our fear of uncertainty.” Brene Brown, professor, author, and podcast host who talks a lot about vulnerability and courage. So if you imagine a calendar of my life that begins in 1987 in Soviet Union, this quote could easily be pinned to the year of 2012. That was the year that I felt the call of God to ministry and the year when I responded to that call. It was the year when I said, “Hieni.”

Yes, hieni, and No, it is not Russian. It is Hebrew. And it is a word with a basic meaning of “Here I stand.” But if we look deeper in the context of the Hebrew Bible, Hee ne nee means, “Here I am. Here is all of me. As Rabbi David Cohen put it, “Here I am ready and waiting to do Your will. Here I am, a partner with You.” Hieni, to me, is a position of one’s heart, when we are open, and true to what God has called us to be and to do. And that requires vulnerability and as we know from Brene Brown, vulnerability requires courage and faith. Hieni is about showing up with courage, vulnerability, and faith. I promise I took the authority to preach the Gospel and not Brene Brown. But today her research and writings truly speaks to the passage and to my own way of saying Hieni to God. Hieni was the very word that Samuel kept saying as God kept calling him. Hee ne nee is a traditional word for a call story in the Hebrew Bible. Abraham, Samuel, prophets, and others said Hee ne nee to God when God called them to a specific task, a place of leadership, and often with the prophets, to speak the word of truth oftentimes harsh and unpleasant, to the people of God. And since today’s story is a story of Samuel’s call and the day when I am standing before you for the first time as an ordained elder in the UMC, I thought I would share my call story with you.

As everyone’s call story, for we all are called to be co workers and partners with God in sharing God’s love with the world, my story begins at the waters of my baptism at a Russian Orthodox Church in Samara, Russia when I was a baby. The only proof of that is my mom and my grandmother’s word and a cross that I had as a child for the longest time roped to my crib until I took it off and of course lost it. I assume that I had no baptism certificate since I was born in the Soviet Union that was atheist for 70 years. Unlike Samuel, who was serving God from a very early age, I did not grow up going to church at all and came to faith when I was 20 years old. And unlike other children who knew exactly what they wanted to be when they grew up, I had no clue what I wanted to become. Perhaps the only thing that I vividly remember dreaming of as a child is going to America. And that dream came true when I came to the US for the first time on a short-term visa with a program called Work and Travel USA and then I won a green card lottery, which later I found out had one out of 50,000 - chance of winning. And I truly

believe that God had something to do with it. So I moved to Brooklyn in 2010, found a nice job, and a small Russian speaking church.

It was 2012 when I first heard God call to ministry. It all started on New Year's Eve of 2012. I prayed to God that 2012 will be one of the greatest in my life and I will be open for the leading of God's spirit in my life.

One of the first things I started doing that winter is going to Young Adults services in Times Square Church on Friday Nights. These things do not go together: Young Adults at church on Friday night. That winter the theme of almost every Friday night was surrendering to God. We sang "I surrender." We sang "I give myself away."

I sensed some movement in my heart but had no idea that God was speaking to me. Just like Samuel who did not know yet the Lord, meaning he never heard anything from God and it was very hard for him to know that God was speaking, it was hard for me to recognize that God was speaking to me as well. In today's passage, it says that the word of God was rare those days. And how often we go through periods in our lives or perhaps our whole lives without really recognizing the voice of God in our hearts. But we know that God speaks to us. God speaks to us in a myriad of ways, through scripture, and prayer, and people, and nature. Sometimes God's voice comes to us in the midst of struggle, dissatisfaction, and a place of tension. Not that God creates that tension, but God is able to use that and work through that for a better purpose.

So what happened to me is that I started to experience dissatisfaction with my work. I had a stable job at a small company where I was able to grow in my responsibilities, my relationships with my coworkers and customers. The company felt like a family. But something was off. Spiritually speaking, I felt like there's got to be more to life than just this. I felt like I was called to something more meaningful than selling jewelry at trade shows, something that could bring healing, hope, and light into this world. I was very passionate about Gospel, the love of God through Christ, the healing and transformation that God brings into our world through the work of the church. I think I started to slowly realize that God has called me into ministry. But I had no idea what to do about this. So what one does when they don't know what to do - one googles it. It did not help me. So I was still clueless as to what to do next.

And it was not until June of 2012 when God had opened up a way and a door for me to pursue my call. In June of 2012 a team from Samara UMC, my home church in Russia, including my mom, came to Ohio to learn about Methodism here. In Russia, which is mostly Russian Orthodox, no one knows about Methodism and John Wesley. People are very sceptical and even scared that it could be a sect that lures people in for money. And so the pastor, from Samara, Pastor Olga, decided to take a group of younger people to show them that Methodist in Mainstream here in the States and in fact, there is a Methodist church almost on every corner here in Ohio. I did not tell you one big part of this trip: The West Ohio Conference of the UMC has a partnership with the Volga region where I am from and where Samara UMC is. Pastors and people from my home church came to the US and people from Ohio went there to support the church's ministry and share in the fellowship and joy of the cross cultural community. In fact,

even Pastor Larry has visited my hometown and spent time there with the community. I was not going to that church yet and I was probably four years old. So I joined that trip as one of the translators. One day the people from Samara had a picnic with the bishop, Bishop Ough at the time and other people from the West Ohio area. I remember very clearly that Pastor Olga wanted to talk to the bishop about me. She was worried that I lived by myself in such a big area of New York. So she and I went to talk to the bishop. I do not remember what exactly I was saying, but there was a clear moment and realization for me that I need to show up here and I need to tell him that I think God was calling me to ministry. I did not know how to tell him that, I was scared. But then I gathered all my courage and told him that I think God was calling me into ministry. I can't remember what we have talked about but he asked me if I would like to go to seminary. I said "Yes."

What happened next was a beautiful, magical blur of a day. There were people talking, phone calls being made. I was asked if I would like to visit a seminary the next day. I said yes! I remember people who were there and saw that moment me telling the bishop I perhaps was called to ministry, still tell me how incredible that felt to witness something like that. The bishop arranged for me to visit MTSO the next day. When I was at MTSO, my heart was on fire. It was burning and telling me "yes, this is the palace you are supposed to go to." So beautiful, peaceful, a perfect place to study theology! I came back to New York City after the trip and applied to go to MTSO. In August of 2012 I moved on campus and started my studies. And like Americans say it, the rest is history. There I met a guy named Josh who became my husband in 2015. I started serving here at Powell UMC. I graduated and I started my candidacy process in June of 2015. The Candidacy process with many interviews and paperwork is a continued place of discernment. What I realized is that discernment happens in community. Samuel needed Eli to help him understand that God was speaking to him. My call was too discerned together with the community. That journey that I just told about is beautifully depicted on a banner that was made by a team under leadership of Nancy Tela. Joy Waldron, Nancy Chrsitoff, Nancy Kaasa, Judy Koenig, Kim La Rue, Terry Troutman and Alan Shore - all worked on this beauty!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Beloved! I believe God calls us and God speaks to the deepest places within our hearts. God speaks to that vulnerable place where we are as whom God created us to be, the beloved children with the gifts that we bring into this world and with our imperfections that remind us of our need for God and God's grace. God calls to that place where we are deeply loved. I believe if we create space and time to look at that place deep in our hearts and sit with it and with God, we will be able to know what is it that God is speaking to us and what God calls us into. I pray that our lives be a beautiful expression of God's love for us and for the world and that we are able wholeheartedly say to God "Hee ne nee, Here I am, Lord." Because ultimately, that will not only bring goodness, meaning and light into this world, but to us as well.

