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Columnists

Hearing and answering God's call

By Father Albert Shamon

Sunday's readings: (R1) 1 Samuel 3:3-10, 19; (R2) 1 Corinthians 6:13-15, 17-20; (R3) John 1:35-42.

Aside from the Christmas and Paschal cycles of the liturgical year, 33 or 34 Sundays are simply called Sundays of the Year.

The first of these Sundays — which marks the Baptism of the Lord — closes the Christmas cycle. The last is the Feast of Christ the King. Some of these Sundays come before Lent; the rest follow Pentecost.

The Gospels of the early Sundays tell of incidents in Our Lord's early ministry after His baptism. The theme for Sunday's Gospel, which relates Jesus' call to His apostles, is God's call and man's response.

The calls of Samuel and of the four apostles are vivid instances of the truth that every man has a vocation. Life is purposeful; every man is called to fulfill some purpose.

The New Testament is freighted with vocational expressions. Christians are spoken of as "called to belong to Jesus Christ," "called to holiness," "called to live in freedom," "called according to God's purpose."

God's call is not always clear and distinct. Samuel mistook the divine voice for Eli's. Samuel needed guidance, and went to Eli for it. Eli could have told Samuel: "Now listen here. I'm the priest around here. You're just a boy of 12. You're hearing things. Forget it. If God wants to speak, He'll speak through me."

Or Eli could have said: "Well now, you've heard a voice. Let me see. You know what I think it means?" And then Eli could have perpetuated some pet opinion of his own.

But Eli did neither. He sent Samuel to God, and God spoke to Samuel.

The same was true of John and Andrew. They also needed direction to discover Christ. John the Baptizer gave it even when he knew that in pointing out Christ to his disciples, they would leave him.

Youths need counselors today — parents of the caliber of Eli and the Baptizer. They ought to be men and women willing to take second place in leading others to God; men and women who guide, but do not impose; who

A Word for Sunday

draw, but do not drive; who point out, but do not force; who inform consciences by echoing the voice of God expressed in the teachings of Christ in His Church; and who motivate youths to make the right choices by themselves setting the right example.

Samuel listened to God's voice; in reward, he received a message. John and Andrew spent a day with Jesus; they ended up living the rest of their lives for Him. Cooperation with God in the little things wins greater things.

God is so patient with children. Three times He called Samuel by name. Even with grown-ups, Jesus went more than halfway. When John and Andrew tagged after Him, He took the initiative to ask: "What are you looking for?"

They asked in turn: "Where are you staying?" They wanted to have a long talk with Him. They were seeking the Messiah in dead earnest, and He did not let them down. "Seek and you shall find!"

Andrew told Peter: "We have found the Messiah!" John noted the time — about 4 in the afternoon. Whenever a man meets Jesus, he knows the date and the hour, for he is never the same thereafter.

A vocation common to all Christians is to lead others to Christ. An old man like Eli guided a young man like Samuel. A brother, Andrew, led a brother, Peter, to Christ.

God also works at the most unlikely times. Sometimes it is when men are asleep, as in the case of Samuel. Other times it is after work at 4 p.m., as with John and Andrew.

But best of all, God often works through the most unlikely people — even you and me, if we let Him!

The victory of two Hebrew women

In ancient Israel, the Hebrews were ruled not by kings but by judges. The judges were called on by the people to settle disputes and offer advice, and the Hebrews abided by the judges' decisions because they believed these rulers to be inspired by God.

A certain woman named Deborah was known throughout the land as both a prophetess and a judge. She held court every day at a spot near a palm tree. Eventually, this spot came to be known as Deborah's Palm Tree, and people came from all over the region to obtain her wise counsel.

Although the Hebrew people were governed by judges, a cruel Canaanite king, Jabin, had conquered their land. The Hebrews were forced to pay taxes to him, and they constantly prayed to God for help.

One day Deborah summoned General Barak to her palm tree and said, "The time has come for the Hebrews to overthrow these Canaanites and their false gods. Gather up an army, and God will help you defeat our enemies!"

General Barak hesitated a long time before he replied: "Have you forgotten that King Jabin's commander-in-chief is the ruthless General Sisera? How can we possibly defeat his forces? Not only does he have a multitude of soldiers, but he has 900 chariots of iron?"

"No, General Barak," Deborah chided, "it is you who have forgotten something of great importance. We have God on our side, and it doesn't matter how things might appear."

General Barak looked down in shame. "All right, Deborah," he said, without looking up. "I will go and meet General Sisera in battle, but only if you accompany our forces."

"And so I will," Deborah replied. "But, know that the honor of the victory against Sisera will go to a woman!"

General Barak gathered 10,000 Hebrew soldiers on Mount Tabor, and Deborah marched with them. Before long, General Sisera mobi-

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lized his troops, filling the valley below with chariots and men as far as anyone could see. "Now is the time for victory!" Deborah commanded. "Let us go forth with God into battle!"

Just then, a violent rainstorm began, and all 900 of the Canaanite chariots became stuck in the mud. General Sisera's men were defeated by the Hebrew soldiers, but, the general was nowhere to be seen. During the battle, he had crept away, looking for a place to rest before he assembled another army.

Coming to the tent of a woman named Jael he asked her: "May I come in for a rest?"

She nodded, showed him to a place to lie down and gave him some milk to drink. Just before Sisera fell asleep, he told her, "Stand guard by the door. If anyone should come by, do not tell them I am here."

Again, Jael nodded. As soon as she was certain that he was asleep, she killed the general, who had terrorized the Hebrews for 20 years.

And so it was, just as Deborah had foretold. The victory that day went to two women. Peace ruled the land for 40 years, and Deborah continued to hold court beneath her palm tree.

Scripture reference: The story of Deborah is found in the Old Testament in the Book of Judges, Chapter 4. When Deborah and General Barak heard about the defeat of Sisera, they sang a song of victory, which is found in Judges, Chapter 5. It is one of the earliest examples of Hebrew poetry.

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