

“Live the Dream”

I Samuel 3:1-20 John 1:43-51

The passage from I Samuel is one of the better known Old Testament stories. Unfortunately what we tend to focus on is the image of the young boy Samuel being called by God four times. The first three times he thinks it is ancient Eli, his master and mentor, who is calling him, but it is really the Lord. Eli coaches him to answer the Lord’s call saying, “Here I am Lord.” We have a tendency to turn it into a cute story about a young boy receiving his calling from the Lord. Even the lectionary only calls for reading verses 1-10. It only offers verses 11-20 as an OPTION. But this is most certainly NOT just cute story about a boy being called by the Lord, because when the Lord speaks things happen. The last can become first and the first last. As soon as Samuel begins living the dream the oppressive status quo is shattered and God’s justice begins to prevail. Let’s take an in depth look at this ancient dream of God’s which is renewed throughout the centuries by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We begin with the background, the situation at the time. We are told in the opening verse that **“The Word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”** This begs the question “Why?”

Is it because God has nothing to say? Perhaps, but I can hardly imagine God not having something to say. This opening line suggests that the normal way of things is for God to have lots of things to say and for visions to be widespread. In fact one could say that it is indeed a very bad sign when in any given time and place the “word of the Lord is rare and visions are not widespread.

Why was it that the Word of God was rare and visions not widespread? Is it because God was waiting for the “proper” moment to intercede by word

and vision? Perhaps, for this story from Samuel carefully outlines how God laid the ground work for what was about to happen. Since God is working in and through human history, God must work with faithful human agents and faithfulness usually takes time to develop. We have a very devout mother, Hannah, who is miserable because she has not produced a male child. She goes to Shiloh, a religious site used prior to the building of the temple in Jerusalem. There she prays for a male child and promises God she will dedicate him to the Lord's work. She remembers her vow and as soon as the child was weaned she took him to Shiloh to be raised there to work for the Lord. It will take time for this child to grow to the age of accountability. It will take time for him to learn and grow. In this he is like the baby Jesus who likewise must learn and grow. Sometimes when it seems like God is not doing anything God is laying the groundwork for doing a new thing.

Why was the word of God rare and visions not widespread? Perhaps it is because the religious establishment was corrupt. Eli's two sons would normally take over when Eli died. The priesthood was inherited. We are told in chapter 2 verse 12 that **“the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people.”** They simply saw the religious establishment as a way of freeloading off the people. When people offered up their sacrificial animals Eli's sons would have their servants stick in a “three pronged fork” and all the meat it held would be theirs. They even got to the point where they wanted their cut of the meat before it was burned on the altar. We are also told that Eli's sons were abusing their position by **“laying with the woman who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting.”** (2:22) When their father Eli warns them to mend their ways, they ignore him and to continue going about their corrupt ways. No wonder the word of the Lord was rare and visions were

not widespread! Eli is told in chapter two that God will punish him and his house. He will be allowed to serve out his days as priest but his two greedy sons will be killed by the sword and his family will be cursed and cut off. Eli is told that God will raise up a **“faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and in my mind.”** (2:35)

What is amazing is that God, even in a situation like this can find faithful people to do a new thing. Here he works through a barren woman named Hannah and eventually her first born male child. In the midst of barrenness God can do a new thing. God can work with those who, no matter how much the circumstances seem to declare that there is no God or if there is that God just doesn't care, continue to come before God with humbleness and faith and offer themselves as servants of the Lord.

Time passes. Eli's sons continue their greedy and corrupt ways. The word of the Lord continued to be rare and visions few and far between, but God has a way of raising up someone to live out the dream of justice and right worship.

Finally God is ready and Samuel is almost ready. God calls to Samuel in night, just before dawn, “Samuel! Samuel!” Samuel runs to Eli and says, “Here I am!” Eli tells him that he didn't call and go lay down again. The scene repeats itself two more times and Eli senses that it may be the Lord calling Samuel and he tells him to answer the next summons with, **“Speak Lord, for your servant is listening!”**

God tells Samuel that the house of Eli will be punished for their iniquity and sins. Furthermore, God tells Samuel, **“See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.”** I love that! When God speaks and you listen, you get “tingling ears!” When God is doing a new thing it sets people to tingling!

Tomorrow the nation remembers and celebrates Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s prophetic life. If ever there was a life and dream worthy of celebrating it is Dr. King and the Civil Rights movement. It is a measure of how successful the Civil Rights movement was that today it is inconceivable that in this nation, its government at all levels, its business, its schools, even in its individual relationships would condone the injustice of assigning second class status to anyone because of their race or ethnicity. True, more subtle forms of this injustice persist but it persists in the shadowy recesses of our hearts and minds and in the shadowy areas of the status quo. It is hard to imagine a time now when "separate but equal" was the law of the land.

I can remember as a college student in the 1970's walking through an old Florida courthouse that was no longer in use. There amidst the dust and cobwebs of history I saw a water fountain with the sign over it "For coloreds." Even in the mid 70's it seemed like marches for simple universal human dignity and justice for all was a long time ago, even though they had taken place only a decade before!

Martin Luther King would become a modern day Samuel, speaking the word of the Lord against a corrupt, unjust system, which in many circumstances was supported by either at best a complacent religious establishment and at worst a religious establishment that enjoyed the fruits of the unjust culture and was blinded by these fruits to the injustice they help enable. There were a few courageous pastors and churches that spoke out but they paid a terrible price for doing so. Such pastors often lost their positions and churches were bombed.

In April of 1963 Martin Luther King was in Birmingham, Alabama. He was in jail. The local clergy association had condemned his actions. Like Paul of old, King wrote a letter from jail to the churches of Birmingham and

their clergy. In it he described his vocation, saying, **“...I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their ‘thus saith the Lord’ far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.”**

Later in the letter he makes a scathing observation, not about the Ku Klux Klan or the White Citizen’s Council but about white, church going, moderates, he wrote **“I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action’; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a more ‘convenient season.’ Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”**

I don't know about you but these words, as so many of Dr. King's words, still have the ability to "tingle." Like you I've heard Dr. King's speech at the Lincoln Memorial, "I Have a Dream" countless times. Every year on Martin Luther King Day we hear snippets of it again and again. His God-given, biblical vision that all of God's children will be judged by the "content of their character" and not by the "color of their skin" still makes me tingle. His dream that someday people of all colors and conditions could live together in peace and with justice, still makes me tingle.

I find it particularly compelling that Martin Luther King's vision was not limited to his own race. Against the advice of many of his own counselors and supporters he came out against the war in Viet Nam, on the same grounds of standing for peace and justice that was the foundation of this civil rights work. He would be assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, while there in support of economic justice for those who picked up the town's garbage. I think Martin Luther King would be thrilled that after his death the idea of civil rights, simple justice, peaceful coexistence and a recognition of interdependence, has been applied by one group after another, whether it is feminists, homosexuals, migrant laborers, religious minorities, etc. For we are all God's Children.

I can't bring this sermon to a close without saying a good word about Eli. So often all the focus is on Samuel in this story and rightfully so, but let us not forget Eli. I have to say that unfortunately the character I most identify with in passage from First Samuel, is not Samuel but Eli. I would love to say it was Samuel who answers the call of God that I most identify with, but it's Eli. Poor ole Eli whose sons so disappoint him and God. Poor ole Eli who is part of the old way that is passing. But Eli has enough insight to know that it may well be God who is talking to Samuel. Notice Eli can't

hear God himself, he just knows that in such mysterious moments God often speaks. Maybe Eli even had moments like that from time to time.

After Samuel received the word of the Lord that condemned Eli and his whole family, Samuel lay awake worrying about it. What would he say to Eli? His fears come to fruition when the old priest Eli, in a real role reversal, asks the young servant boy Samuel what the Lord said. Samuel at first says nothing, but Eli insists saying, **“Do not hide it from me.”** Samuel relents and tells Eli everything the Lord said to him.

Unexpectedly Eli, who has just been condemned, whose whole family has been condemned, says, **“It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.”** Eli yields to God’s word of judgment. Eli doesn’t try to stop God’s new thing. Eli yields and does not try to wheedle out of it. Eli doesn’t even offer up pleas for forgiveness. Eli simply yields to God’s new thing. Eli knows that his sons are not worthy to be priests after him and that he should have done more to stop their greedy, blasphemous, ungodly ways. So it is that Eli yields and simply gets out of the way of God’s new thing.

God’s dream for peace, for justice, for love between all people, for shalom, is still alive. It is alive in spite of all humankind’s sinfulness and blindness. No matter how bad things get, no matter how far we get from living out this dream, there is always the possibility of God doing a new thing to get the dream back on track. As Walt Brueggemann says of this passage from First Samuel, **“There is a chance for newness, and that chance is rooted in Hannah’s piety, in Israel’s daring doxology (praise of God), in Eli’s yielding, in Samuel’s availability, in God’s resolve to do a new thing.”**

God’s dream is alive and well. May we, like Samuel, say, **“Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”** Let us live the dream! Amen.

