

“Feel the Tingle and Pass It On”

I Samuel 3:1-11 John 1:43-51

Scott B. Martin - January 18, 2009 (MLK)

God takes a great deal of time and trouble to get Samuel’s attention. Even though he has spent his entire life in and around the temple and helping the head priest he does not recognize God’s voice. Even though he has helped Eli perform religious rituals and knew the religious language he does not recognize God’s voice when it comes. Even though he is sleeping right next to holy of holies, the Ark of the Covenant, the very throne of God, he does not recognize God’s voice when it comes. Three times God tries to speak to Samuel and Samuel believes it is his master Eli speaking. Even Eli with all his years of experience is slow to catch on, but finally he advises Samuel that should he hear the voice again to say, **“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”** **“....your servant is listening....”** What Samuel heard just before dawn must have set him all a tingle. God promises that what people will see happening in the land and what they will hear from Samuel will set all the people a tingle who have ears to hear.

What Samuel hears from the Lord that causes him to tingle, is first a word of judgment. The priesthood normally passed on from father to son, but Eli’s sons were wastrels and sinners. We are told that their sins were so great that even sacrificial offerings in the temple could not atone for there sins. They were unworthy and the Lord was going to pass over the house of Eli and make Samuel a prophet, God’s spokesperson.

This was indeed a new thing. At this time Israel had never had a king. It was a loose confederation of tribes held together by their religious faith. This meant the priestly/prophetic house not only was in charge of religious

matters but also had great influence on political matters. So it is that when the people begin to demand that Israel have a king like all the other nations, God will use Samuel to anoint, Saul, Israel's first king. God will use Samuel again, to anoint David king, when Saul loses favor with God. Since its inception Israel strongly believed that the hand of God was behind historical events. So it is that God tells Samuel **“See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears tingle.”** (I Samuel 3:11) God invites Samuel to feel the tingle of God's new thing. God invites Samuel to not only feel the tingle but to pass it on to others.

This week there is a very appropriate conjunction of special days. Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Day and Tuesday the United States will inaugurate its very first black president. These two historical events are directly related. Barack Obama could not have been elected president without the civil rights movement of the 1960's, whose primary spokesperson and prophetic leader was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. These two moments in history, separated by almost 50 years are inextricably linked and part of one long historical process that started long before the civil rights movement crystallized under Dr. King's leadership and which hopefully will continue long after President Obama's presidency is over. This goal is to move towards creating the “beloved community”, a community built on the pillars of justice for all, a community built on love of God and love of neighbor.

Dr. King felt the tingle long ago and passed it on to others through his eloquent words and even more eloquent sacrificial actions. There must have been a time when Barack Obama felt the tingle as well, perhaps while doing community organizing in a Chicago ghetto. We know he was inspired by a

sermon that Jeremiah Wright preached at Trinity UCC on the “Audacity of hope”, which became the title of his best selling book. In this book President elect Obama writes about the power of the African American religious tradition and its powerful contribution to social change in this country. He writes, **“Out of necessity, the black church had to minister to the whole person. Out of necessity, the black church rarely had the luxury of separating individual salvation from collective salvation. It had to serve as the center of the community’s political, economic, and social as well as spiritual life; it understood in an intimate way the biblical call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and challenge powers and principalities. In the history of these struggles, I was able to see faith as more than just a comfort to the weary or a hedge against death; rather it was an active, palpable agent in the world. In the day-to-day work of men and women I met in church each day, in their ability to ‘make a way out of no way’ and maintain hope and dignity in the direst of circumstances, I could see the Word made manifest.”**

(Audacity of Hope, p. 323-324) I believe it’s safe to say President-elect Obama has felt the tingle of God’s presence and Word and is doing his best to pass it on.

I’ve been reading a biography of Dr. Martin Luther King in preparation for this week’s momentous events. In this biography Stewart Burns, the author, speaks of how a very young preacher, still working on his doctorate found himself thrust into the whirlwind of conflict over civil rights in Montgomery, Alabama. He had taken a church there and many of his members had long been involved with local organization pressing for social change, especially around something as simple as being able to sit where you want on a bus. It seems unimaginable to us today that there was time in

our lifetime when blacks had to sit in the back of the bus and if they were in the middle of the bus and a white person wanted that seat they could be asked to stand and give it to the white person. Thank God this seems unimaginable to us today!

Dr. King did not set out to become a civil rights leader. When Rosa Parks and others were jailed over refusing to give up their seats on a bus Montgomery Improvement Association was formed and Dr. King was elected leader and spokesperson, because he was new to town and was a pastor. A bus boycott was begun with three simple goals: courteous treatment by the drivers of ALL passengers; a first-come-first serve approach to seating and hiring black bus drivers for predominantly Negro routes.

It doesn't sound like very radical demands but it created a storm in the white community and among white business and political leaders. While preaching one night Dr. Martin Luther King's house was bombed. His wife and children were home, but were unhurt because of quick thinking by Coretta. On another occasion Dr. King was jailed. Threatening phone calls came at all hours of the day, threatening to kill Dr. King and his family if he didn't leave town.

Not surprisingly, this all began to test Dr. King's faith. Burns writes that Dr. King, the son of preacher, initially had a very intellectual faith, that he initially sought to take some of the emotion out of African American religion. After being released from jail Dr. King spoke at a mass meeting trying to assure people he was alright. He would say later of this speech that he was "trying to convey an overt impression of strength and courage, although inwardly I was depressed and fear-stricken." In an off-the-cuff

comment he told one person “If one day you find me sprawled out dead, I do not want you to retaliate with a single act of violence.”

His act of strength and courage didn't fool 72 year old Mother Pollard. Afterwards she hugged him and said, **“Son, what's wrong with you? You didn't talk strong tonight.”** He tried to assure her he was fine, but she said, **“You can't fool me. I knows something is wrong. Is it that we ain't doing things to please you? Or is it that the white folks is bothering you?”**

Once again he tried to assure her he was alright. Again, she wasn't fooled, “Now, I don told you we is with you all the way.” Her aged face radiated serenity, a serenity born of long years of struggle walking with the Lord. **“Now, even if we ain't with you, the Lord is with you. God's gonna take care of you.”**

Dr. King later wrote of this encounter, **“everything in me quivered and quickened with the pulsing tremor of raw energy.”** Dr. King was feeling the tingle of God's presence. He would be able to continue to try and pass on the tingle to others. Mother Pollard had shown him the way.

We know the rest of the story. Dr. King would eventually be cut down by a sniper's bullet, but not before he shared his dream of land where whites and blacks could dwell together in peace and harmony, a beloved community, a land where a person would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. Dr. King believed that the arc of history bent towards justice and through his life he lent his weight to this bending towards justice. He and countless others, most of them unsung, like Mother Pollard have lent their weight to bending the arc of history towards justice.

This has brought us to this monumental historical moment. You could feel the tingle the night Barack Obama won the election and he gave a speech before tens of thousands of supporters in Chicago. Tears were flowing on black faces, on white faces, on brown faces and yellow faces. John McCain in his concession speech recognized the historic nature of the moment, as has President Bush in his comments.

This does not mean that the battle has been won and there is no more work to be done. President-elect Obama won just 10% of the white vote in Alabama. Senator Kerry had won 20% in his losing bid. In Mississippi Obama won just 11% and 14% in Louisiana. Granted these are now very Republican states but these numbers still reveal a lingering Jim Crow attitude among some.

Across the north there was a rash of cross burnings. A black church was burned on election night in Massachusetts. In New York a black teen was attacked with a baseball bat while his white attacker shouted "Obama." In Idaho school children reportedly chanted "assassinate Obama on a bus. The secret service has reported that there have been more numerous threats to President-Elect Obama than for any other president-elect. This includes a plot by two skinheads to kill Obama and dozens of other African-Americans. White Supremist leaders report a surge in interest in their websites and organizations.

Yes, there is still work to be done but you can feel the tingle. God's tingling people are on the move. The arc of history is bending towards justice. Let us add our weight to this bending toward justice and do our part to create God's beloved community. May we not only feel the tingle of God's new thing but may we also do our part to pass the tingle on to others. Amen.

