

God's Call

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“The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”
– 1 Samuel 3:1

As most of you know, the scripture readings from Sunday to Sunday follow a three-year cycle called the lectionary, and that cycle is built on telling the story of Jesus three times – once by Matthew, once by Mark, and once by Luke. John is far less interested in telling the story of Jesus than in preserving long passages of Jesus' words, which is why the lectionary follows a three-year rather than a four-year cycle. Readings from John are inserted by the lectionary editors in the stories told by the other three evangelists.

And this morning is when we hit that bump in the road in the story of Jesus when we go from reading and talking about his infancy to reading and talking about his adult ministry – with nothing in between. Last week, the magi were presenting him with gifts, this week he's presenting Philip and Nathanael with a choice: to go on with their business-as-usual, grown-up lives or to follow him in a new way of life not determined by sin and death. A baby doesn't offer that kind of invitation.

It's an abrupt chronological shift, and it would have been nice had Jesus' story followed the usual pattern of birth, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and so forth, but the writers of Jesus' story weren't really interested in his biography. They were interested in his identity – was he or was he not God's Messiah? – and the only pieces of Jesus' biography that were of interest to his biographers – and I use that term very loosely to describe the evangelists – were the pieces that confirmed, in their minds, that Jesus was indeed the one they'd been waiting for.

He wasn't, however, the first. The Jewish people, who understood themselves to be descendants of Abraham and Sarah, the elderly couple called by God to a mission of showing the world how to live blessed lives, those chosen people had waited time and again for God to raise up leaders for them who would get them back on track. The history of the people called by God was punctuated by charismatic figures who heard the same call from God that upended the lives of Abraham and Sarah, and those figures caught a glimpse of what it could mean to build a very different world from the dog-eat-dog place that most of us have lived in for most of human history. When people respond to that call, their lives are never the same again.

Our first lesson, from which I have taken this morning's text, is the story of God's call to one of those figures, the great prophet Samuel. Samuel lived about a thousand years before Jesus, and he lived during one of the most turbulent and uncertain and defining moments in Israel's history. Samuel lived during the transition from the period of the Israelite judges to the beginning of the Israelite monarchy. That period saw a huge shift in the way resources and

power and freedom were distributed in Israelite society. During the period of the judges, Israel didn't have a standing ruler; the elders of the families and the villages and the clans and the tribes managed day-to-day affairs for ordinary people, and when the twelve tribes faced a crisis that needed unified action, God's Holy Spirit would come upon an individual like Joshua or Gideon or Samson or Deborah – they were called judges – who would lead the people through the crisis and then retire to their farm, where they functioned a bit like Israel's supreme court. The judges had power and resources only on an as-needed basis; there was no standing army, there was no permanent royal court, there was no government bureaucracy.

All of that changed during the life of Samuel. For some decades prior to Samuel's birth, the Israelites had been feeling that the system of judges was becoming increasingly inadequate to keep them safe and secure in the land that God had promised them, and so they started hankering after a king like their neighbors had. Kings ruled for life. Kings kept an army at the ready. Kings had royal officials to sort out difficulties and keep things running smoothly. Kings provided stability and continuity, as well as prosperity, because they built empires. They needed those empires to support their royal court and their standing army and their governmental bureaucracy, and those empires provided raw materials to make expensive trinkets for the wealthy, and those empires provided jobs for the up-and-coming in the foreign service.

That's what kings did, the Israelites believed, and they wanted one for themselves. They wanted the prosperity and prestige and power that comes from having an absolute ruler, and they were willing to pay the price in terms of burdensome taxation, loss of freedom, and entanglements in foreign wars that meant little or nothing to ordinary Israelites.

And with the emergence of kingship there arose a new institution in Israelite society, the court prophet, of whom Samuel is the first and the greatest. The prophet represented not just the voice of God, but the voice of the people chosen by God for a mission not of empire but of blessedness. God did not call the Israelites to be imperialists; God called the Israelites to be witnesses, and it was the prophet's job to remind the king that he was the ruler of a people who already had a mission and that mission wasn't to further the king's imperial interests. It was the prophet's job to speak truth to power by reminding the king – and all the king's men, let's not forget them – that long before they're ruled by a monarch, people are ruled by a conscience, and that conscience comes from God. That's God's call that comes not to just a few, but to everyone.

It turned out to be Samuel's life's work to remind first King Saul, then King David that they and all of God's people were called and ruled first by God, and only secondly by the king. And that is not a message that a king wants to hear. Rulers have always thought of themselves in absolutist terms – they're the ruler and there is no other – and kings have never lacked for flatterers and sycophants and arrivistes who will tell them what they want to hear.

But prophets tell rulers what they need to hear, and that's why we need prophets. Every people needs those voices of conscience who will speak on behalf of those who have been left out, left behind, and left to fend for themselves as best they can, while the ruler and the ruler's friends attend to those with the money and the influence to buy the ruler's attention.

This is an old story, and it was old already by the time of Samuel. Lots of empires had already risen and fallen around Israel by the time Samuel emerged to remind the Israelites of the corrupting effects of power and the dangers of concentrating power in the hands of a few. The great lie of absolutist rulers is that they promise to make their people strong when they always, in fact, make their people weak – and lazy and greedy and stupid – because the people stop taking responsibility for themselves, and they allow their leaders – the king and all the king’s men and all the king’s women – to make their decisions for them.

Samuel would grow up to warn the Israelites that this was the way of kings, but the Israelites wouldn’t listen, and Samuel would be forced to watch a once free and noble people subject themselves in bondage to unworthy rulers. That was the life to which Samuel was being called in this morning’s first lesson.

And it was a similar call Jesus issued to Philip and Nathanael and Andrew and Peter and all of his other followers. The call to follow Jesus is a call to Calvary and resurrection. It’s a call, as our Statement of Faith puts it, to accept both “the cost and joy of discipleship.” There is joy in knowing that our ruler is not the president or the governor or the mayor or the pope; our ruler is God, lover and maker of all.

God’s call, friends, is not to a pleasant life among your friends in the pews. God’s call is to leave security behind, to shoulder a burden, to witness to the light, and perhaps to take up a cross, so that the truth beneath our easy lies and easy lives might not perish from the earth.

Tomorrow we commemorate Martin Luther King, the most eloquent prophetic voice of our era. We all know the outline of King’s brief life and tragic death, but not many of us remember how threatening and unpopular King was during his lifetime. We’d like to think that King’s assassin, James Earl Ray, was an isolated psycho who irrationally hated a saint-in-the-making, but the historical reality was far different.

Millions of Americans – God-fearing, churchgoing, respectable Americans, just like most of us here this morning – hated Martin Luther King and everything he stood for. They thought he was an extremist, an agitator, and they told the *New York Times* that his proposals for civil rights were “reverse discrimination.” We now know that President Kennedy, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover all authorized our government’s secret operatives to spy on King and, if possible, undermine his civil rights activism. King and his associates, like Rosa Parks, weren’t considered heroes or prophetic by most Americans during their lifetimes; many people considered them un-American. In 1966, two years before he was assassinated, a national poll showed that seventy-two percent of Americans had an unfavorable opinion of Martin Luther King. James Earl Ray’s hatred of King may have been extreme, but it was far from isolated.

But King was a Baptist minister grounded in the prophetic tradition of the Christian and Jewish traditions stretching back to Samuel. The word of the Lord was rare in the days when King undertook his work; visions of what a truly free and truly prosperous America might be for all its people and not just for a privileged few were not widespread. Most Americans were content with the status quo, as most people have been for most of human history. Most of us go along to get along because we’re comfortable enough, and we’re not willing to risk our comfort and security for those on the margins or in the dustbin.

The call of God to speak out on behalf of justice and peace is just as controversial today as it's ever been. An NFL quarterback kneels during the national anthem to protest the treatment of African-Americans and our president – and many of his women and men – call the quarterback disrespectful. Really? Since when is it disrespectful to call attention to injustice? When the music plays and the flag waves and everyone stands up, we want conformity to the national myth; we do not want to be reminded, in those moments of high patriotic drama – or, if possible, ever – of our ongoing national sins against ethnic minorities and the poor.

We want God to fix what we've broken – and break again and again – and the sorriest of us retreat into an increasingly strident nationalism if we're political or a variety of apocalyptic scenarios if we're religious or simple cynical hedonism if we're neither of the above, and all of those reactions are admissions of failure and despair.

But God's call does not fail and it does not despair; it persists. It is the love that will not let us go. It isn't always clear, it's often unexpected – “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” – and it's never easy. We all respond to that call in different ways, and how we choose to respond to God's call is what history will know as our life.

How have you chosen to respond? With enthusiasm? With indifference? With reluctance? Your life is not what happens to you; your life is how you choose to respond to God's call. And it's never too late to make a better choice. The call is always there.