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St. Margaret's Church
Epiphany IIB – The Call of Samuel
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You know the prophets Samuel and Martin Luther King, Jr. would have had much easier lives if they had not listened to God. Samuel grew up in the temple just doing his regular chores. Lighting the oil lamps, sweeping the floor and putting the books back in order in the pew racks. He did whatever Eli told him to do. He never asked any questions. He never even contemplated listening for the voice of God. It doesn't seem that anyone was listening to God back then. The author said that "The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread" (I Samuel 3:1). The people kept coming to worship like they were supposed to do offering up their sacrifices and songs and prayers, but they weren't listening.

"So it's not surprising that when twelve-year-old Samuel hears a voice while sleeping in church—he was neither the first nor the last to sleep in church—he assumes it's Eli. Who else could it be? Three times he's awakened by someone calling his name. Three times he goes to Eli and asks what he wants. After the third time Eli wonders if, although God hasn't been heard from in those parts for some time, perhaps Samuel is hearing God's voice. He tells Samuel that if he hears the voice again he should answer, "God, I'm listening." God speaks and gives Samuel disturbing news that Samuel doesn't want to repeat. After he hears God's voice, Samuel's life is never the same. It's harder."ⁱ

Martin Luther King, Jr. came from a long line of preachers in his family. Like Samuel, he too grew up in the church. But Dr. King wrote "It was a kind of inherited religion and I had never felt an experience of God in the way that you must if you're going to walk the lonely paths of life."ⁱⁱ

Dr. King even became the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church without having had a firsthand experience of God. And then Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus. Suddenly Dr. King found himself in the middle of a boycott. He was only twenty-seven years old, and yet he quickly became the leader of a movement that would change the world. Soon the threatening phone calls began, and he was having second thoughts wondering if his family would be safe. "Then one night, around midnight, another threatening call came: 'We're tired of you and if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out and blow up your house.'"ⁱⁱⁱ

He later described what happened after that phone call. "I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. And it seemed to me in that moment that I could hear a voice saying to me, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And I will be with you, even until the end of the world.' I heard the voice of Jesus saying to fight on."

After Dr. King heard God's voice, his life was never the same. It was harder.

I wonder what we would hear if we listened for God's voice?

What might God tell us to do today, even if it may make our lives a little harder?

Of course we hear God's call for us in our baptismal vows that charge us to continue in the apostles' teaching and in the breaking of the bread and in the prayers. We are to keep resisting evil and repent and return to the Lord when we sin. We vow to proclaim the word of God and spread the Good News of God in Christ. We are supposed to seek and serve Christ in all persons and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And finally, with God's help, we are called to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

But it seems to me that there is something more that God is calling us to do, especially at this time of transition in our country and in our own church community. I hear God calling us to be in relationship. That's what our Baptismal Vows are all about, being in relationship with God and with each other. And if I am correct, and God is saying that to us, then life will never be the same. In fact, it is harder to find energy to work on our relationships.

But what if we did?

When Martin Luther King was in jail in Birmingham in April of 1963, he wrote "I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. **We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.** Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial 'outside agitator' idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds."

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.

We need to be in relationship with each other. And we have not always done that well. We have erred and strayed like lost sheep. We have done those things which we ought not to have done and we have left undone those things that we ought to have done.

At yet it seems that we are embarking on a new journey in our country and in our church.

Yes, we have a new president coming into office on Tuesday. But it is not about him. It is about us. It is about being tied up with one another in that single garment of destiny.

I feel it all around us. It is about us. We are ready. We are ready for a new beginning, full of hope.

I feel it in the way our children are asking different questions. I feel it rushing in from the Chesapeake Bay as we wonder how we can better care for our environment. I feel it springing up from our own backyard gardens as we think about where our food comes from. I feel it in the emails and phone calls I get from you, wondering how you can help in our church's time of transition. I feel the hope in your offers to help those who are hurting in this economic downturn. I feel it in our food pantry collection box in the vestibule that is more overflowing than ever. I feel it in your eyes at the altar rail as you extend your hands to receive the body of Christ. I feel it in our conversations in our Living the Questions class and in our adult forum as we delve deeper into the Word of God, wondering how we can follow Christ more faithfully. I feel it as I watch a miracle take place on the Hudson River as a potential disaster turns into something showing us the power of God working through the human spirit. I feel it all around. I feel the hope.

Our hope is found in God, but God cannot work alone. God needs our flesh and bones to put hope and faith into action. God is calling us to do what is right -- to listen for guidance and to get to work. God is calling us to be honest about our own prejudices that lie so deep within us. We are afraid to admit them, but we must repent and let go of our hatred and apathy and cling to our hope and promise of a new beginning. We are called to gather and to worship and let that worship and experience move us to respond and say to God as Samuel did, "Speak, for your servant is listening." We are called to be servants of the living God and to bring hope alive in the world.

Yes we have problems and challenges in our world and in our own lives. Surely we each play our own part in those problems. But we cannot keep waiting for someone else to fix them. We have to take the first hopeful step. We have to find the courage to take a stand and to speak when it would be easier to remain silent. We have to find the resources to care for those who are in the greatest need and then ask the difficult questions. Why are they hungry? Why are they sick? Why are they homeless?

We are called to pray and to teach the Good News of God in Christ. We are called not only to tolerate our differences from each other but to celebrate them. We are called not to simply turn our eyes from injustice and inequality but to be impatient and resist.

To bring about change in the world, we have to bring hope back into our homes, our church and our country. In 1963 in that same letter from jail, Dr. King wrote some words that are unfortunately still ring true forty-six years later. He said that "the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust."

I think we have the potential now to recapture that sacrificial spirit in the church and turn that disappointment into promise. In order to be in relationship with one another, we may have to give up a few things. We will have to give up the status quo. We may have to give up the claim that we are always right. We may have to curb on our spending and consumption. We have to let go of our greed and isolation. And we have to cut back on our complaining and pessimism. Because hope abounds, and hope will overcome.

It is now our turn to meet the challenge and face the future with courage and strength.

God is calling us to be disciples of hope. We are being lead into relationship with Jesus and with each other. It will not be easy, but with God's help and with the help of one another we will go out into the world as servants. And then our hope will finally overcome.

ⁱ **The Courage to Listen, The Courage to Preach**

2009-01-12 by Brett Younger <http://www.goodpreacher.com/blog/index.php?page=2>

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*