

Westminster Sermon — "Widespread Visions"
Scripture Readings — 1 Samuel 3:1-11, John 1:43-51
Sunday, January 18, 2015
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Our first reading is 1 Samuel, chapter three, verses 1 through 11. In keeping with her promise to God, Samuel's mother dedicated his life to God, and so Samuel has grown up in the temple, serving Eli the priest. Samuel will grow to become one of Israel's greatest prophets and will anoint David as king. However, at the time of this story, Samuel is simply a young boy, who does not yet know God. Today's reading tells of God's call to Samuel, a story that speaks profoundly to all of us who have heard or long to hear God's call. Hear now God's holy word.

1 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. 2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 3 the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. 4 Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" 5 and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. 6 The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." 7 Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. 8 The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. 9 Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10 Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." 11 Then the Lord said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle."

Amen.

Our second reading, John chapter 1 verse 43-51, is another story of call, telling of Jesus' call to some of the first disciples. Like Samuel in our first reading, Nathanael does not know initially whom it is that calls him; yet his eyes are opened by his encounter with Christ. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." 44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45 Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." 46 Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." 47 When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" 48 Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." 49 Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" 50 Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." 51 And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Let us pray: Insistent God, by night and day you summon your slumbering people, so stir us with your voice and enlighten our lives with your grace that we give ourselves fully to Christ's call to mission and ministry. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The title of the sermon: "Widespread Visions"

"The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."

What an opening. In these words, we hear both the sense of God's absence, and also great expectancy of God's presence—deep anticipation—enormous potential.

"The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."

With these words, we know we are about to hear of one such vision, so much more precious for its rarity.

"At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim, so that he could not see, was lying down in his room."

"Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him."

Eli and Samuel are neatly paired in this story, old man and young boy; Eli with his dim eyesight, and Samuel with eyes not yet opened.

Both are, in their own way, blind. And what a place to start both our stories today!

For both our reading from 1 Samuel and our reading from John are rich with the senses:

Hear, listen, speak, see—

So it seems fitting to begin in a place of blindness, of the absence of sense.

The story of Samuel deals mainly with listening, while that of Philip and Nathanael deals mainly with sight—but both begin with dim eyesight, with blindness and deafness to God.

And they end in extremes—Jesus promises Nathanael a sight unlike any other, an assault upon the senses, of the heavens opening and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.

And God tells Samuel that what God is about to do will make the ears of all who hear it tingle—an assault upon the sense—a prophecy that is not just heard, but makes the ears ring and respond.

This weekend our country remembers and honors another child of God who also spoke words to make our ears tingle—words that ring our ears and move our spirits, words that moved us as a nation from blindness to sight, that revealed God's kingdom to many.

Dr. King gave many speeches and preached many sermons, but whose ears among us still do not tingle when we hear those words that ring through time—"I have a dream...."

In those days the word of the Lord was rare, and visions were not widespread—but Dr. King and the women and men who worked alongside him had a dream of God's kingdom, a dream of God's justice and love for all.

But this vision was frightening, and it was for this vision that he was killed.

It is common sense in preaching to focus only on the passage that has been read, but I'm going to break that rule, and go further into our story from 1 Samuel.

Usually, when this passage is read, it ends here—with Samuel finally responding to God's call—a grand moment, an uplifting end.

Less often is God's actual prophecy read, the vision which God wishes Samuel to tell others. Because this vision is frightening, and Samuel, the Bible tells us, is afraid to speak it.

Eli's sons, priests of the temple and powerful men, have abused their position. They have profited from their comfortable lives, considered themselves entitled to benefits of the institution—and God has had enough.

This thing that God will do that will make the ears of all who hear it tingle is nothing less than the total and eternal destruction of Eli's family, from beginning to end, with no hope for redemption.

God has had enough of the corruption, the blasphemy, and so will overturn the world and make it new.

Samuel has good reason to be afraid.

Dr. King's dream, told not only in Washington but in every speech he ever gave, every protest in which he marched, every peace he disturbed, foretold the overturning of the world—and those whose lives were comfortable, who profited from the world as it was, had no interest in this changed world.

Yet this vision is ancient, and did not belong to Dr. King alone—for it is the vision of God's kingdom on earth, of God's justice and love for all, that Jesus preached and lived.

At the end of our reading from John, Jesus too promises that the world will be overturned, that the heavens will be torn open, that everything will change.

And this vision was just as frightening then.

This is only the beginning of Jesus' ministry, yet we know that this path leads to death on a cross, to execution by a world that does not want to change, a world that finds it easier to stay blind.

Yet Samuel took courage, and told his vision anyway.

Yet Dr. King took courage, and shared his dream anyway.

Yet Nathanael took courage—and followed Jesus anyway—for this vision is powerful, and full of hope—for in such a changed world, even death will not be the end, and the cross will give way to an empty tomb.

And perhaps that's enough. We must be like Samuel, and like the disciples, and like Dr. King, and take courage, and open our eyes and ears to God and say "Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening."

But.

There's another part to these stories that we cannot ignore.

For neither Samuel nor Nathanael heard or saw God at first.

Samuel thought Eli was calling him—over and over again he made the same mistake. In fact, he might never have figured it out—God could have called forever and never been heard.

It is Eli who realizes who is calling Samuel, Eli who tells Samuel what to do and how to respond. Eli breaks open the constraints of Samuel's understanding of his world, and shows him a new way.

And Nathanael does not believe Jesus could be the Christ. His own earthly prejudices blind him to the possibility—"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

How many people did not hear the vision of God told by Dr. King because they were blinded by their own prejudice? How many repeated the words of Nathanael—"Can anything good come from a black man?"

Even Dr. King almost kept silent about his dream that day in Washington.

His written speech, the one he had prepared to give, was based on a complicated metaphor of cashing a bad check—of a bankrupt America, of difficult-to-follow economic terms and ideas.

And, unsurprisingly, he started to lose the attention of his audience.

And so Mahalia Jackson, the singer and activist, who knew his gift for preaching, called out from her seat behind him—"Tell them about the dream, Martin!"

The rest, as they say, is history.

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But it is not history. For in these days the word of the Lord is rare, and visions are not widespread. This is still the opening of our story. In these words, we hear the sense of God's absence. Corruption, hatred, prejudice, brutality, and death seem to have the final word again, and again.

But this is still our opening, and in these words we also hear great expectancy of God's presence.

For God is always present—God is always calling our names—Christ is always telling us to come and follow.

And we, too, need our Elis to break down our conceptions of the world so that we can hear God.

We, like Nathanael, need our prejudices challenged so that we might see God everywhere God appears, no matter how unexpected.

And we need our Mahalia Jacksons, reminding and encouraging us to tell others about this dream of God's kingdom on earth, where all are treated as God's beloved children.

Sometimes we will reveal our own prejudices when confronted with Christ, for we all have them.

Sometimes we will be too afraid of the change that comes with God's good news, for our lives are comfortable.

Sometimes, like Samuel, we will run to earthly masters when we hear God call our name.

BUT.

We will learn to know God's voice and delight in our name when God calls it.

We will take courage and let our tingling ears direct our hands and feet and voices so that we can make change and build God's kingdom as the body of Christ.

We will overcome our prejudices, transformed by our encounter with Christ, seeing the world with new eyes.

Because our God is a god of justice.

Because our God is a god of love.

And because we will do this together, as the body of Christ. We will be strong for each other. We will hold each other up when we falter.

We will be each other's Philips, demanding that we come and see.

We will be each other's Mahalias, encouraging each other to share this dream.

And we will be each other's Elis, reminding one another to always, in all things, turn our attention to God, and say: Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.