

“Your Servant Is Listening”

Valley Presbyterian Church – January 14, 2018

2nd Sunday after Epiphany

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

Rev. John Wahl

I Samuel 3:1-18

When my Uncle George was a student at Louisville Seminary in the late fifties and early 60's, he worked as an intern at a church in the Portland neighborhood. Portland had long been a white, working class neighborhood; but it was starting to change: racially and economically; something like, as I've heard, what started to happen in neighborhoods like Collinwood or Miles Park a half-century ago. One of the churches in Portland sent around an invitation to sponsor a civil rights leader from Montgomery, Alabama who would be coming to speak. To my uncle, it seemed like a no-brainer for he and all church leaders to attend; but as the date of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s visit approached, it was made known to Uncle George, in not so subtle ways, that he was the only white minister to have signed on as a sponsor.

About two decades later, I was one of a number of students who took part in the first year of a “busing” plan which sent white kids from the suburbs to a predominantly-black school in the inner-city of Louisville. On that first day of fifth grade, the bus came to pick me up and, after a 90-minute trek that included changing buses once at my local school and again at the bus depot, I finally arrived at school; only to see that many of the parents had arrived ahead of us, and had formed a human tunnel stretching from the bus to the school entrance. Their fears eventually subsided and turned out to be unfounded; I had a great year at school as the downtown location of the school allowed for our teacher to lead us to explore the city for all its rich diversity.

Dr. King wrote:

"Religion operates not only on the vertical plane but also on the horizontal. It seeks not only to integrate (people) with God but to integrate (people) with (people) and each (person) with himself (or herself). This means, at bottom, that the Christian gospel is a two-way road. On the one hand, it seeks to change the souls of (persons), and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand, it seeks to change the environmental conditions of (persons) so the soul will have a chance after it is changed."¹

This weekend, we remember and celebrate Dr. King and his contributions in the march toward civil rights in our nation. Sometimes, the progress has been painfully and frustratingly slow. Sometimes, Dr. King's dream of a world where the content of character is more important than the color of skin seems to be elusive. Sometimes, the forces of bigotry and hatred seem to be too pervasive and powerful to overcome.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Strive Toward Freedom” as quoted by Irv Moxley in “Not Without a Witness”

Sometimes, like we heard in today's reading from I Samuel, it seems that "the word of the Lord (is) rare...visions (are) not widespread." (v. 1)

The prophet Samuel was called at an early age in a dramatic and painfully ironic way: the young boy thinks that the voice calling him in the night belongs to his mentor, Eli, but the voice actually belongs to God; and the message he is called to speak is against Eli and his house.

Eli's two sons – who were, because of Eli's advanced age and declining health, serving as Temple priests – had been blaspheming God. Specifically, as was revealed in chapter two, they were keeping the best parts of the animals being sacrificed in the Temple for themselves, rather than offering them to God. This selfishness was indicative of the uncharitable ways they were treating others around them: specifically, the poor and the needy. Maybe this is why God's word in those days was so rare: meaning precious, a description typically reserved for an item like jewelry, with the idea of something extremely valuable due to its lack of supply.²

It is hardly surprising, then, that in such an age Samuel would not be expecting to hear God's voice in middle of the night. It takes Samuel barging into Eli's room three times before the older man understands that his young protégé is not just dreaming, but that the precious word of God is being spoken.

For, he knows the story of Samuel's mother, Hannah, who prayed to God that she would no longer be barren, promising to commit her son to God's service. After her son is born and weaned, Hannah brings Samuel to the Temple to learn the ways of God under Eli's tutelage. In her song, recorded in chapter 2, Hannah sings of the character of a God who breaks "the bows of the mighty" and yet girds "the feeble" with strength. (v. 4) This is the same God who "raises up the poor" and "lifts the needy." (v. 8) From the beginning, Samuel learns from his mother that God's central concern is for the poor and the powerless; and will judge those who prey on the vulnerable and abuse their power.³

And so, after being awoken three times, Eli offers advice to Samuel: telling him that if the voice returns, he should respond, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." (v. 9) It turns out that Samuel's first message is no easy task: he must tell Eli, his mentor, that destruction will be coming to his house, and that no sacrifice can be made to avoid it. Eli, knowing what courage it sometimes takes to speak God's word, encourages Samuel to recount the whole story and hold nothing back. Though he and his family have been complicit in the injustice, he accepts God's verdict and puts his trust in God's ultimate goodness.

A couple of years ago, the United Church of Christ launched a campaign called *God Is Still Speaking*; every time I walked by Federated Church I would see the billboard in front of the church. I certainly don't dispute this claim and, like me, you probably

² Roger Nam from *WorkingPreacher.com*

³ Callie Plunket-Brewton from *WorkingPreacher.com*

have examples you could give to proclaim this to be true. But, I believe, the more pertinent question today for us – God’s servants – is: *are we listening?*

In 2001, my church in Louisville was presented with the opportunity to sponsor four young men who were refugees from Sudan. They had all become orphans during their nation’s civil war, and were numbered among the “Lost Boys” who walked as children for hundreds of miles until reaching a refugee camp in a neighboring country. Now, over a decade later, they had been given the opportunity to come to discover a new life in the United States. Abraham, David, James and James (they all took on English, biblical names in the refugee camp, but sometimes those names were pronounced differently) were all in their late teens, although each was given a birthdate of January 1st, because no official documents existed.

When they arrived, they were certainly scared, but quickly endeared themselves to the whole congregation. They especially took to AJ, who was just a toddler, and they loved to carry him around, propped on their shoulders, the same way they had once transported their fellow orphans at home. We even used to joke that AJ’s first language, when he would babble, was *Dinka*.

Over months and years, the bonds between these four young men and the members of the congregation continued to deepen, even as they attained driver’s licenses, degrees, jobs and eventually wives and families. I’m sure everyone involved would say that God spoke through that relationship and they were glad they were listening.

In 2007, Isaac Monah was finally able to return to his native Liberia and visit his home village, and found that the children of Twarbo region faced the same situation that he did as a child in the 1980’s. Apart from moving to the capital city of Monrovia, there was no opportunity for education. So, Isaac gathered a group of people from his church, Noble Road Presbyterian in Cleveland Heights, and churches throughout the Presbytery (including this one) who shared his dream and determination to build a school. In 2012, the first classes were held at the Dougbe River Presbyterian School and now more than 150 students from six surrounding villages are living that dream.

Like the “Lost Boys,” Isaac was displaced from his home as a child because of civil war and spent years in a refugee camp, finally earning his high school degree at age 27. Like them, he was able to come to the United States with the help of a sponsor: in his case, it was a professor of anthropology at Ohio State who met Isaac while doing research in Africa. And like the four young men from Sudan, Isaac heard the voice of God speaking to him and has made the most of his opportunity in order to give back to the children of his home village who still need help.

As Dr. King said, the Christian gospel is a two-way road. It is both about relationships between people and God, as well as between people and people. As people seeking to listen to God speaking, we must therefore be willing both to listen for God’s voice, and to listen to those to whom God has already spoken and who are seeking to change the environment and conditions in which we live.

The story of God speaking to Samuel reminds us that sometimes, the precious word of God can be difficult for us to hear. It might call us to sometimes stand alone in the face of injustice; it might challenge some of our belief systems; and it might prompt us to confront our fears and speak out against racism and bigotry. The witness of the biblical prophets reveals that God has no tolerance for those who abuse their power, prey on the weak, or eat their fill while others go hungry.

Thus, our call as God's people is to act on this movement to justice: by helping the poor, by feeding the hungry, by assisting those who are suffering from natural disasters, by welcoming those who are refugees of civil war into our midst. We are all God's children, each created in the image of God: no matter our country or creed, race or religion. Eli's sons failed to hear the voice of God, visions were rare in their day; and Eli was forced to accept God's judgment against him and his sons who abused their positions of power and failed to act for justice. But, we believe not just that *God Is Still Speaking*, but that we are the Lord's servants who are called to be listening: to God and to one another; for our sakes and for the sake of our entire world. AMEN.