

Sermon: Speak, your servant is listening
2 Epiphany, Year B
1 Samuel 3:1-20

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Many years ago when I was first starting to consider that God might be calling me to the priesthood, and I had entered the diocese's formal discernment process, I remember calling my mentor/priest, Cindy Baskin. Cindy, a strong influence on my life, had vocalized many months before that she thought I had a calling to the priesthood. One day I called her to talk about this crazy idea of ordination, and I said, "Cindy, I just feel *nervous* all the time – mind, body and spirit – as I explore this call." I thought she was going to give me a gentle pastoral response and say something like, "oh, you'll be fine, God's peace will come to you, all shall be well." But she didn't say that at all. Instead she said, "you better get used to it!" That was some pastoral response! Basically she said, "Buck up." I think she was trying to articulate that responding to God's call would not be easy, that there would be many times when I would feel inadequate to the task, many occasions when I would feel weak-kneed or fearful about what I perceived God to be demanding of me.

In today's reading from 1 Samuel, the boy Samuel gets a call in the quiet of the night. When he hears his name, Samuel goes to the elderly priest Eli, "You called me?" "No, I didn't call you; go back to bed!" This happens two more times before it dawns on Eli that God is up to something, so he says to Samuel, "If it happens again say, 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.' Of course, Samuel is called one more time and this time, Samuel responds to God, "Speak, for your servant is listening!" And we could end the story there. If you look at your lectionary insert, you will see that the rest of the passage is in parentheses and is therefore optional. It would be tempting to end it there because it is such a wonderful encounter up to that point. A boy who is serving God in the temple hears God call his name while he is asleep. Lovely! This is a mountain top experience!

Who of us wouldn't like to hear God call our names? Who wouldn't want such a vision as to have God standing there – yes, the text says that the Lord came and stood there, calling Samuel. You can almost hear the angels singing in the background. This is a great call story. "Samuel! Samuel!" So clear, so simple, so sweet a story. If it stopped here. But it doesn't stop here.

After Samuel tells God to speak, things take a turn. They intensify. After listening to God, Samuel realizes he's got to do a very difficult thing in telling his mentor Eli that God is sick and tired of the wicked shenanigans going on with Eli's wayward sons, and Eli's authority as priest is to be taken away from his house. Understandably, Samuel is left fearful of telling Eli about this conversation he's had with God. After Eli demands he tell him what God said, brave Samuel bucks up and tells him everything.

Samuel's story is not about a general religious awakening but about speaking God's word in a time of spiritual desolation and political danger. Speaking truth to power was Samuel's job. And it wasn't always a very enticing job. But as God's instrument, God was with Samuel, supporting, empowering and encouraging.

Tomorrow we will celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr., a prophet in our own time (or at least for some of us older folks). It took tremendous courage and clarity of purpose for Dr. King to live into God's call, to take the personal risks to articulate a message of God's love and justice for all people, black and white. Social and religious justice is God's work. Like the prophet Samuel, speaking truth to power was Martin Luther King's job. Somewhere along the way he allowed his faith to overcome his fear. He bucked up; maybe he even got used to it.

We often fail to recognize God's call. Most of us don't have the experience of hearing God calling our names out loud once, much less three times. Samuel needed Eli to help him know that it was indeed God who was calling him. You and I need each other to discern God's voice and to support each other when we are called to difficult situations. We are not all called to the exact same ministries. And yet you and I, by virtue of our baptism, are called to be the prophetic voice in the world around us - maybe at the kitchen table teaching our sons to respect girls, maybe driving in the car teaching our granddaughters it's o.k. to say "no." Maybe it is to speak up for healthcare on behalf of the poor, maybe to be in solidarity with addicts who are trying to get sober, maybe to reach out to our Haitian and African American friends to say we love you. For us to say "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" means being ready to hear what God has to say and sometimes to be willing to go to the barren places where it seems there is no sign of God.

As a Christian your life is not your own. As we remember in our burial liturgy, "whether we live or die we are the Lord's possession." So often we fail to remember this. We are here on this earth to serve God, to listen to what God has to say and to participate in God's kingdom here on earth. We must look at what is going on around us and see where the corruption is, notice where the injustices are. When we have leaders in any capacity who lie, who bully, who mock the poor, who disparage those who are struggling, who lack decency or lack moral authority in general, we must lead ourselves. In the absence of faithful leadership whether it be in the political realm, the church, our work lives or at home, you and I must be the faithful leaders, who speak truth, who honor God's creation, who lift up the poor or who stand in solidarity with the disenfranchised.

We often celebrate religious mountain top experiences as ends in themselves, but Samuel's story and Dr. King's story remind us that God's mission doesn't end on the mountain top. We have to come down from the mountain to do the work God has in mind for us. Sometimes I do believe God just wants us to enjoy God's creation, to rest, to rejoice, but sometimes God makes huge demands on us, requires us to do difficult things, to go into the places that seem void of a holy presence. The good news is that God goes before us and with us into those places, supporting, empowering and encouraging, and uses us to usher in a new era, a new beginning for life, abundant life, to unfold.

So the next time you are feeling nervous after you have been listening to God, buck up! Get used to it! And know that God is indeed standing right there with you as you respond, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Amen.