

Dr. Paul Tellström
Epiphany 2B MLK Sunday

Irvine United Congregational Church, UCC
January 18, 2009

Hebrew Testament Reading: I Samuel 3:1-20
Gospel Reading: John 1:43-51

word count: 1,537

This Sunday presents an interesting intersection between the sacred and the secular. Tomorrow is a national holiday, but it is one with a deeply moral dimension. This morning the scriptures we hear are about how people are called with a responsibility to lead others in discovering what we gather for in worship services like this as we search for a relationship with God.

On the day after tomorrow, people will gather in the cold of Washington and around television sets everywhere to watch an historic inauguration, and many will not miss the significance of these days occurring so close together; as someone once said, “King walked so that Obama could run.”

Our hopes, our prayers, our dreams for a better America are renewed again in the calling of a promising new leader, and in our own calling to greater unity and purposes as Americans.

In many churches in America today, we are hearing about being called, and how that calling shines into the darker corners of our national life, our Christian denominational identities, and our personal values.

The Rev. Dr. King personifies to us a presence both human and symbolic in modern America of how we are informed by our faith and reason, and how those two things can call us to an overwhelming mission. Dr. King’s mission cost him his life and it is still incomplete.

As a young minister, Dr. King must have felt like Samuel, hearing the story of our faith and being caught up in a vision of what it meant to assist in creating God’s realm on earth. Like Samuel going to Eli in the morning, Dr. King must have felt fear that what he knew he had to say would not be gladly received in the courts of power.

Yet Eli knew, and we know, that the slow march for justice will prevail when we hear its call and rise up to follow it.

Martin Luther King felt that he was put in a place in a special time because God had a use for him. He had wanted a quiet life as a professor. He had earned a Ph.D. at Boston University and hoped to be President of Morehouse College in Atlanta someday.

Owing to a peculiar turn of events, as a young pastor he was thrust into the forefront of the Montgomery bus boycott, and it was in Montgomery that his youth and inexperience was tested. After a contentious series of public meetings and confrontations, he came home late one night, tired and frightened. The phone rang. An angry voice on the other end said, “We’re gonna get you!” followed by a racial epithet. Martin Luther King recalled that he stood in his kitchen, frozen in fear, aware that he was jeopardizing not only his own life, but his young family’s as well. He wanted to call his father for reassurance and advice, but his father was not there.

Then he said it was as if he heard a voice there with him in that kitchen. “Martin, you do what’s right. You stand up for justice. You be my drum major for righteousness. I will be with you.” He had heard his name called. He described a feeling of knowing what God wanted with his life. His life was forever changed and through his life, so was the world.

It was more than personal courage, strong faith and a good education that gave Martin Luther King what he needed to rise above his fear. He was given a vision that was greater than his own.

Canadian Mennonite and author Rudy Wiebe tells the story of a Mennonite farmer named Sam Reimer. One night Sam hears a voice saying to him, “Samuel, Samuel ... I am the God of your ancestors, the Lord your God. Go and proclaim peace in Vietnam.” In perplexity, Sam goes to his pastor, who tells him to listen for the voice a second time. The next night the call comes again, but Sam cannot get anyone to believe that he has truly heard God’s voice. His pastor won’t believe it; neither will his wife or his fellow Mennonites. The Canadian government won’t give him a visa to Vietnam; the inter-Mennonite Church Service Society won’t help him. Sam’s reaction to these rebuffs is to give up hope and die. On his deathbed he said to his wife, “When I heard the voice, I should have gone. Left a note and gone. When you know like that, that you are chosen, you shouldn’t wait or talk, but go.”¹

Sam Reimer heard the same call that came to Samuel the prophet. However, Sam Reimer’s call never materialized into a prophetic mission because the community surrounding him failed to support him. If old Eli, despite his shortsightedness and personal failures, had not counseled the young Samuel on recognizing and responding to his call, how could the fledgling prophet have learned to open his mind and heart to receive it?

C. S. Lewis said there are two kinds of people in the world: those who respond to God saying, “Thy will be done” and those to whom God says, “All right, then, have it your way.”²

As you return the call that *you* may hear, may you so stand in the stream of God consciousness, that the waters of God’s love may carry you in the directions the Spirit would have you go.

We are all called to make a difference somehow. Even when people might say that we are too small, too weak, too insignificant to change the world, we are still called to try. Nathanael heard about Jesus from Philip, and asked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip replied, “Come and see.”

Calling is a difficult thing to describe because it is personal. Yet somehow, your calling works its way out in how you affect the lives of others. For us, it is often in our calling that we find our strength. I have to tell you, I felt this church rising to its calling for justice during the campaign against Proposition 8. So many of you, particularly straight-supporters, came out to the phone banks, marches, protests and meetings, not to mention getting out the word in conversations or even yard signs. As a result of your visibility, I was contacted by a law firm in San Francisco, and was asked to write a little about our story for an Amicus brief going before the California Supreme Court along with a few other faith institutions. It was filed a few days ago.

Many of us remember seeing the grainy black and white footage of the civil rights marches in the sixties. Martin Luther King was often at the front, and received his share of stinging high-pressured water hoses. Rev. King once remarked that he and the other marchers had a common strength.

He put it this way, “As we went before the fire hoses; we had known water. If we were a Baptist or some other denomination, we had been immersed. If we were Methodist, and some others, we had been sprinkled, but we knew water.”³

You and I know the water. We share this common symbol, this initiation, this rite, this power in our connection to the sacred over the deep and raging chaos that so often visits us in war, in violence, in injustice and in hate.

Bernice Powell Jackson has spoken of Dr. King as being an advocate for non-violence in a violent world. She includes this now-famous quote: “We can no longer afford to worship the God of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation.” We can do better than we have...and our best days lie ahead.

Dr. King went to Memphis, Tennessee in 1968 to speak to a community in turmoil. In a church there, he gave his last public speech....

“There are still difficult days ahead. We are still in for a season of suffering, of dark and difficult moments . . . We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience . . . I know that some of you are asking today, ‘How long will it take?’ I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth pressed to earth will rise again.

How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever.

How long? Not long, because you still reap what you sow.

How long? Not long, because the arm of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.

How long? Not long, ‘cause mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

As a church and as a nation we have a calling... what is yours to reflect upon today? Let’s use this day of remembrance and the days ahead of national celebration and new beginnings in response to that call find the strength to be a righteous, decent and loving people.

We are called.

We are called with authority and strength.

We are called as peacemakers. And our identity is in the image of the Creator that we call “Love.”

Please rise and join me in singing “We Shall Overcome” # 570 before our closing Alleluia. You don’t need the words—I’ll give them to you.

1 We Shall Overcome... Deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day.

2 We’ll Go Hand in Hand...

3 We are not afraid...

4 Our God will see us through...

5 The truth shall make us free...

6 We shall live in peace...

Sermon Resources

- 1) Rudy Wiebe, *Returning God’s Call*, Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989, 10.
- 2) John C. Purdy, *The Blue Mountains of China*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970.
- 3) This and other Dr. King anecdotes from Brent Porterfield’s *And the Lord Called...*

Scripture for Sunday, January 18, 2009
Epiphany 2B Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday

I Samuel 3:1-10, (11-20)

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

Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" 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.

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

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. 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.

Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." 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. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever."

Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am."

Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him."

As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.

John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 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."

Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."