

Hearing Things

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1 Sam 3:1-20

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'The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.' These words -- these frightening, foreboding words set the stage for the prophetic call of Samuel, a teenage boy working and living in the temple, under the care and instruction of the high priest Eli. We greet Samuel and his master Eli at a time when Israel feels like God isn't connecting with them; when there is a lack of a real leader as the time of the judges begins to wind down and Israel restlessly begins their wishing for a king. The Philistine threat is growing around them, the tribes are fearful under their lack of unity and there is a sense that God was being quiet. It's not clear why the word of the Lord was rare -- if it was because of God's silence or because of Israel's inability to hear it, but it was rare.

Enter young Samuel who finds himself hearing things one night. What's striking is that the text tells us that Samuel did not yet know God. In spite of spending his whole life living and working in the temple, in spite of having been dedicated to this ministry by his mother Hannah who clearly knew God, our text makes a point of telling us that Samuel did not yet

know God. But the text also makes it clear that God knew Samuel. And God calls to Samuel in the middle of the night, over and over again until Samuel responds.

The lectionary tries to let us off easy. It wants to shave off the hard stuff, tries to wrap up this story with the persistent call of a loving God and then the eventual dutiful response of Samuel, God's faithful servant heeding his master's voice. The lectionary is tempted to make this story idyllic, gentle, beautiful, but it's not. When we read the verses the lectionary puts in parentheses we learn what the call is about: God's call is more than just tender invitation -- Samuel is being told of the doom that will befall the house of Eli because of the reckless disobedience of his sons and his inability to reign them in. There needs to be a new leader in the temple, corruption must be chased away -- and Samuel is the one to do it. Samuel tries to hide from the first task of his call -- he hopes to avoid telling his caretaker of his upcoming demise -- but Eli knows, just as he knew it was God calling, that God's word was, well, God's word. Samuel's first assignment from God is to do the one thing he least wants to do.

We often have a lectionary view of call. We hope to hear things ourselves -- a definitive word from God to direct and guide us. We want a crystal ball telling us where we should work, how we should parent our children, who we should vote for so that we know clearly that what we are doing is the best thing and is the God-ordered thing. We want a tender, gentle, beautiful moment in which we recognize without a doubt God in our midst, where we feel connected to

God and feel that we are in fact special to God. We want to be called and to receive our call clearly...or we think we do.

See, if what we see with Samuel is any indication of how God works we might recognize that call isn't easy. And while our passage marks the beginning of Samuel's long ministry as priest, prophet and judge -- and of God's faithful presence in the midst of it -- we learn that hearing things from God doesn't mean that life is going to be easy. God was not calling with the winning lottery number, the fast track for ending economic recession or the easy button for achieving world peace. God's call did mean telling the truth about corruption, it meant standing up to someone loved, it meant that change was coming...and we all know that change isn't easy -- even when it is good change, even when it is what we need.

So when we hear Samuel's call in the fullness of its context we are reminded that while the direct line from God brings assurance and power, call isn't easy. It doesn't disentangle the complexities of human relationship or power dynamics -- in fact it adds to it. It meshes religion and politics, fear and transformation, trades lies for truth. It pushes us out of our comfort zones and away from the simplicity of sticking with the status quo. God's call anchors God's initiative in the drama of human life. God's call isn't easy -- it never is.

This weekend we recognize the legacy of a prophetic call answered in our own era as we celebrate the life and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Although we now have a national holiday to celebrate strides taken to overcome racist oppression through nonviolent protest and his call to

peacemaking in a time of war -- his call, his journey -- and that to which he called a nation wasn't easy. Yet we look ahead to an event that many see as a new era ushered in by MLK's prophetic witness and tireless hard work. We stand at the doorstep of a new era in our nation as we prepare to inaugurate the first African American president -- a president who ran on a platform of change, a platform of hope. With economic recession, lingering war in Iraq, rampant bloodshed in the middle east, this change won't be easy.

But in spite of reminders of how tough liberating change can be, that it is often as uncomfortable as exciting, we are reminded that we worship a God stands with God's people. When God calls and we respond, God acts. God does not leave God's people, even when God's word seems rare -- we read of a God who persistently and consistently interacts with creation, calling us to newness and fullness of life.

When we read this story of Samuel's call -- and when we hear the enticing call of disciples in Galilee of our Gospel lesson for today...and remember countless stories throughout our Old and New Testaments we see that **God calls**. Even when we think that God's word is remote, even when we have tuned ourselves out or numbed ourselves from hearing things -- we see that God calls: Moses at the burning bush, Jeremiah in Anathoth, Mary through the angel Gabriel, the disciples by the lakeshore -- God calls them all, and although call isn't easy, all of these stories tell us that God's call brings about a new creation. God's call ushers in transformation, calls God's people to turn toward God, invites in justice. Through the calls

of prophets, kings and us, God ushers in a new era in which justice and peace are possible.

So keep your ears open. Even in the quiet of our slumber, even in the noise of our days, God calls. Let us pray that should you hear things of a heavenly nature you will have the wisdom of Eli to recognize it is God and the courage of Samuel to answer: "Speak Lord for your servant is listening."

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