

Sermon: “A Voice at Midnight” ©

Scripture Reading: I Samuel 3:1-10

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The Rev. Dr. Sally A. Brown

Asst Professor of Preaching and Worship, Princeton Seminary

I. We know this story by heart: Three times, Samuel wakes up in the night to the sound of a voice calling his name. Three times he scrambles to the place where Eli sleeps, sure that the blind old priest is calling him. But the first time, and then the second, Eli says, “I didn’t call you, my son! Lie down again!” Both times, Samuel lies down, bewildered.

The voice calls his name a third time. Does Samuel hesitate a little before shaking the old man awake? The text doesn’t say---but this time Eli starts out of sleep, alert, watchful, a brightness igniting his half-blind eyes that Samuel has never seen there before: “Samuel, *it is the Lord...* if the voice comes again, this is what you should do...” And Samuel lies down, too tense to sleep, and waits.

Generations of us learned the story of God’s call to Samuel in the night as children. The Church has cherished this story—and no wonder. It’s a believable story. No angels here, no burning bushes, no water turned to blood: just a boy in the dark, and someone calling his name, that’s all. It scares you to death and makes your blood race at the same time. It’s also a story that suggests that the presence of God isn’t obvious, like a big flashing sign on Times Square. It’s possible to confuse God’s overtures to us with other things. When God speaks, it might sound at first like the sighing of the wind or the creaking of a hinge. It might sound like the old man in the next room. Samuel and Eli have to consult to figure it out.... which isn’t all that different from what we gather here to do every Sunday morning.

Samuel’s God is a God who draws near, as near as our own flesh and blood and breath, in the midnight hour. No wonder the Church has loved this story.

II. But the church’s tendency, especially in our time, has been to domesticate this story of Samuel’s first encounter with God. And the church has done so by ending the reading too soon (as I deliberately had us do this morning, in fact) and by ignoring the story’s social context. By slicing this story out of its social context, and then breaking off the reading where I did this morning, with Samuel’s response – “Speak, for your servant is listening” – we turn the story into no more than a story about intimate encounter with God. We may miss the story’s real good news it has to tell us in this sixth year of the 21st

century.

Consider the difference it makes if we read a couple of verses that come just before this story, and a couple after. *“Now Eli was very old. He heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting. He said, to them, ‘Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all these people’...A man of God came to Eli and said to him, ‘Thus the Lord has said.... “See, a time is coming when I will cut off your strength and the strength of your family.... The fate of your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, shall be the sign to you—both of them shall die on the same day. I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind....” (I Sam 2:22-23, 25b: 27a, 34-5)*

That comes just before the story of Samuel’s call; and now listen to what follows: *“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.’” (3:11-13)*

Now it isn’t hard to understand why we don’t bring all *that* up in the third-grade Sunday school class. But it *is* baffling that we don’t deal with it in Sunday morning worship. Because taken whole and in its context, the call of Samuel is about more than personal devotion or the rewards of quiet one-on-one time with God. This story’s message for the Church in troubled times is this:

*At a low point in the religious and social life of Israel, God’s word **to and through Samuel was not a word of personal consolation but of social transformation.***

III. No doubt one reason the church has nearly always preferred to focus on the *fact* that God spoke to Samuel rather than on the actual *message* is that the message is frankly unpleasant and has little to do with our 21st century interests. We do not live in a world ruled over by priestly dynasties.

But another, maybe more telling, reason for leaving the context and message alone is that in difficult times (and which of us does not think of our selves as living in difficult times?) a word of personal consolation is *precisely* what we want to hear, not an analysis of social ills or oracles of judgment. The prevailing religious culture in America appears to have a virtually insatiable appetite for a brand of religion that majors in heart-warming, touching stories and strategies for better personal adjustment. If you doubt that, check out the “Christian inspiration” section of any bookstore or website. The pastor of one megachurch, asked by a researcher why he preached about setting priorities,

improving your marriage, or getting along better with your coworkers, but never touched on public, social issues, said he didn't speak about social issues because it made people uncomfortable; and, he said, "people don't come to church to feel uncomfortable."¹

IV. Without a doubt, there is a time and a place in troubled times for the word of consolation. Our God is a God who knows our condition. God is our refuge and strength, says the Psalmist, a very present help in time of trouble. When the earth is rocked by explosion and earthquake, hurricane and flood; when the political scene is rocked by threat and counterthreat backed by nuclear capability and terroristic intimidation, thank God that God is a refuge for the human heart, a source of hope, the One who bears our pain with us.

Some of the most important work of restoration in the aftermath of the tsunami, in the aftermath of Katrina, in the aftermath of the devastating earthquakes in Pakistan, has been the simple work of listening to the lament of the survivors; and that kind of listening will need to go on a for a long time to come. As you know all too well, trauma of such proportions never entirely leaves its victims.

And yet in the Gulf Coast region in particular, it quickly became evident that *God's timely word in the wake of suffering also had to be a prophetic word*, a truth-telling word that asked questions about the slowness of response, the unevenness of access to and delivery of help in the crisis, especially, it seemed, for the poor without the means to flee their drowning city. There comes a time when the word of personal consolation is not enough; real hope depends on God's word of social transformation.

The Christian Gospel is good news, yes---a word of hope; but hope is empty unless the obstacles between present reality and God's future are challenged and removed. Ask any person who has been the victim of oppression or abuse whether there is any hope without judgment, any chance for a different future without changing present conditions. As harsh as the message that Samuel heard may sound, it was a necessary word if the suffering of society's most vulnerable in his place and time was going to stop.

¹ Sally Morgenthaler. *Worship Evangelism* 1st ed. (Zondervan, 1989).

Today we remember the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., another to whom and through whom God's timely word came. The word of God that came *to and through* King in a crucial time in this country's life was not a word of personal consolation but a word of social transformation. For that reason, many of his detractors said he had abandoned preaching for politics. The message that came *to and through* King was a disturbing word, a disruptive word, a word that called for change in the power structures of society; and King knew that broadcasting it would be costly, even dangerous.

V. Some of us may look around at the church today and despair of our ever becoming the kind of prophetic voice for social justice that we once were, even a short 50 years ago during the Civil Rights movement.

Sessions like yours struggle as you do with buildings from an earlier era of the church's life that have monstrous appetites for maintenance dollars. Meanwhile, our denomination seems continually divided, despite the good efforts of some to lead us into strategies for conversation and procedure that might allow space for unity with diversity.

When today's Scripture reading observes that "the word of the Lord was rare in those days, and there was no frequent vision," we can relate. Could there be a better description of the dispirited state of much of the mainline Protestant church today? No one seems to be able to agree what the divine word *is* for our time. On good days, vision for the future from inside or outside the church seems unpromising at best. The lamp of God in the church has not gone out, but in many places it seems to be sputtering and weak.

When the issues are complex and the resources stretched, we may cast an envious eye upon churches that are enjoying tremendous success while they focus strictly on issues of personal spirituality and material success. Maybe you saw the news item in the *NY Times* today about "World Changers Church" which convenes in Madison Square Garden. Clearly, a gospel of personal success sells in this city. It would be easy and maybe more cost-effective to settle for a message of consolation without social challenge, a ministry of care without social justice. It would be easier to leave the sad, complex business of lamenting and challenging what is wrong in our society to others. If only the issues were simpler and the resources more abundant—!

But maybe the best tribute we can pay to Martin Luther King, Jr. today is not to wax nostalgic for a time more like his when the issues seemed more sharply defined, the word of God for the times seemed unmistakably clear, and thousands threw themselves gladly into a clearly righteous cause. Maybe the best tribute we can pay is to listen harder for what God is saying here at 5th Ave. and 12th St. in our own time, and then have the courage to speak up, like Samuel,

when morning comes.

VI. It can be as simple as pressing for transparency and truth-telling.

Some of you have read the story of Beth Deponte, the Dept of Commerce demographer who in 1991 estimated and reported the number of Iraqi war dead at 158,000. Deponte was quickly fired.² And yet, she placed the issue on the table, and finally, this past Dec 12, our administration began to acknowledge on a public newscast the numbers of Iraqi dead in the present conflict, estimated at 30,000. Regardless how justified or unjustified we believe the military action and occupation in Iraq to be, if we cannot name and mourn the true cost in Iraqi lives of our actions, are we witnessing faithfully to the God who made each one of them as well as us, who is grieved by their deaths, and who, incarnate in Jesus Christ, died for all?

Fifty years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr, said:

² Reported by Donald W. Shriver, Jr. "Counting the Dead," *Christian Century* 123:1 (January 10, 2006) 8.

“If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause people everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will. But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, if it will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and truth....People far and near will know the church as a great fellowship of love that provides light and bread for lonely travelers at midnight.”³

VI. Maybe we have been too quick to believe that, as the text says, the word of the Lord is rare in our time, and there is no frequent vision. Maybe we have believed that it is enough in our time to tend the holy places and keep the Temple lamp burning through the night.

Maybe it is enough.

Maybe. . . unless that news item that riveted your attention on TV and hasn't left you alone since constitutes a message of some kind. . . and what about your elderly neighbor who was so worried the other day that if she pays for her prescriptions this winter, she won't have enough money to pay for the heat?

Many people remember how the 381-day bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, began, the day Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus. But fewer remember how it ended. The legal fight in Montgomery had come to a head. The Montgomery Improvement Association had organized massive car-pooling networks to get bus-boycotting employees to their jobs, but now the city of Montgomery was arguing that those involved were operating a private enterprise without a license. If the car pool was defeated, the entire effort of the boycott might end in defeat. It was not realistic to ask people to walk to their jobs.

But around noon on the day when the hearings about the car pool were in progress, a press release reached the courtroom, bearing these words, “The United States Supreme Court today unanimously ruled bus segregation unconstitutional in Montgomery, Alabama.”

A voice in the courtroom cried out, “God Almighty has spoken from Washington!”⁴

³ Martin Luther King, Jr. “A Knock at Midnight,” *Strength to Love* (Fortress, 1963) 64.

⁴ From Martin Luther King, Jr., *ibid.* 67-8.

Brothers and sisters, in the end, *that* is what the story of God's call to Samuel is about. *That* is why this story we have so cherished matters, the one that begins with a boy scrambling through the darkness --"Eli! Eli!! I keep thinking I hear somebody calling my name.... Was it you--?"