

**January 14, 2018 – Second Sunday in Epiphany**  
**“The Courage to Speak”**  
**Rev. Dr. Scott Landis**  
**John 1:43-51; 1 Samuel 3:1-20**

It is very interesting how the lectionary writers have broken up this story from the book of First Samuel – the story of High Priest Eli and his sons ministering in the Temple. And when we drop in on a portion of the passage as we have today, we get only a glimpse of the story. Like a photo snapshot – you really don't understand what is going on in the scene like you do if you watch a video over a prolonged segment of time – and even then, we know only in part.

The lectionary recommends reading only the first 10 verses of the passage which makes for a lovely story often referred to as “the call of Samuel.” The latter half of the story is in parentheses leaving it as an option to include. To be sure some very important nuances are revealed even in the first portion of the story. Descriptions like “the word of the Lord was rare in those days and visions were not widespread,” which gives you a sense of the spiritual life of the time.

It's rather ironic. The setting for the story is in the temple where the ark of God was positioned and the main temple priest – Eli – had all but ignored the possibility of the Presence of God. He is described as having “dim eyesight” (a metaphor for his lack of vision) and “the lamp of the God had nearly – but not quite yet gone out”, still offering a glimmer of hope (but indicating that spiritual presence was not recognized by most). The implication of all this being - corruption had innervated the holy environment of the Temple and God was slowly but surely withdrawing. It was in that same environment that the boy Samuel was being raised as a sort of “Priest Apprentice.”

That's the setting – and now the story gets underway.

One night, while everyone was snug in their beds, God speaks to the boy Samuel. “Samuel, Samuel.” You know the story. As in all good tales, this happens three times and it is on the third time that Eli finally begins to understand what is going on. Despite his failures in the past and his rather jaded view of the possibility of ever hearing from God again – the lamp of God (indicating God's Presence) had not quite gone completely out. There was still a shred of hope.

Eli knew it was God who was speaking and regardless of what it could mean for him, he encouraged Samuel to listen. Listen very carefully.

Now there's a fascinating aside to this whole thing we notice through the language used to describe Samuel's spirituality maturity (or lack thereof) at this time in his life. The scriptures say that, at this point, “he did not yet know the Lord,” because “the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.”

I point that out because, if you remember my meditation from last week, I focused on the idea that God can use almost any means to speak to us today. In this case, God

was using an errant priest who had sinned egregiously, and a young boy who did not even know who was speaking to reveal God's message. The implication being he was so young he had not yet established a relationship with God.

Never doubt the ability of God to communicate through the most unlikely sources. But I digress. Let's get back to the story.

So, Eli encourages Samuel to listen. Listen very carefully to the "word of the Lord." And when God speaks again, we have the famous refrain which could be the ending of a very nice meditation and a tremendous call story, "speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" – words every faithful follower would love to be able to utter with complete sincerity.

But then we move to second part of the story. And here's where things begin to get very interesting. AND here is where our snapshot is not terribly helpful.

In order to understand the words Samuel is being asked to deliver you have to know the backstory. In the preceding chapter we read that Eli's sons – fellow priests in the temple – had taken it upon themselves to dip their hands into the offering plate as it were. The scripture describes this as "blaspheming God," but what they were doing were taking the offerings of the people – animal sacrifices and the like and skimming the best for themselves and leaving the leftovers for God.

To make matters worse, Eli knew that they were doing this, and he did not reprimand them. He simply looked the other way, blaming it on his dimming eyesight, I suppose. But something called him to turn around and stop the trajectory he was on and to begin righting the wrongs he had allowed. His words to Samuel, "What it is that the Lord 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.

The scriptures also state that "Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli." I mean, think about it. Eli is the high priest of Israel. He is the most important priest in the land. Under his charge is the ark of the covenant but he had failed in his responsibilities to God.

Samuel (a boy) – let's say is about 13 or 14, and is called upon to bring testimony against Eli (the high priest). No wonder he is afraid. What gives him the courage to speak? [Pause]

We see examples of it all the time – and it never ceases to amaze me how individuals summon the courage to speak truth to power – listening to the inner voice that guides them.

In the past year we've seen many powerful and privileged men fall as more and more women finally found their voices and courageously spoke out against the sexual abuses incurred as they were merely trying to do jobs. In unprecedented numbers powerful men have admitted fault and have resigned prestigious posts and some have faced criminal charges.

A few years ago we heard the small but courageous voice of the young woman, Malala Yousafzai, who was probably pretty close to the age of Samuel, as she listened to the inner voice that guided her to speak out against the Taliban in Pakistan. It was an incredible display of courage as she advocated for girls' education in her country – a right reserved exclusively for boys at the time. A member of the Taliban tried to silence her through an attempted murder. It was uncertain whether she would survive, but she did. Her movement persisted after which she acquired international fame and among other awards became the youngest recipient of Nobel Peace Prize and the youngest person to address and assembly at the United Nations.

This MLK weekend we are reminded of others who listened to their inner voice and spoke sometimes without words. Rosa Parks famed refusal to relinquish her seat after being ordered by the bus driver when he reminded her that the seats at the front of the bus were for whites only. She had the courage to speak through her actions. She had seen and had enough. Her action insisted that she be heard and demanded that African-Americans no longer be deemed second-class citizens.

And most prominently, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. himself by insisting on non-violence as the means, listened to his own inner voice and summoned the courage to speak through marches, protests, and speeches attended by thousands of people seeking equality for all. His courage took him from a small Southern Baptist Church to meetings in the Oval Office with a battle cry that insisted, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Like the young boy Samuel each one of these courageous human beings – and there are countless others – listened carefully and did more than just say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." They took it a step further – summoning the courage to use their voice, they did what was just. They did what was right. And in so doing, they made a profound difference in their lives and in the lives of countless others.

And the frightening and exhilarating thing is "God is still speaking." And, I believe, God is still motivating those who listen to speak up for the child who is bullied, or the transperson being denied access to a bathroom that matches her perceived identity, or anyone of a number of people from other countries – typically persons of color – who have lost any sense of security in our land.

On this weekend, when we celebrate the supreme example of listening and speaking in the person of Dr. King, may we also observe the lives of many others – past and present – who have summoned the courage to speak. And may we listen – very carefully – to that still small voice stirring in our own lives for the invitation of God to hear and to do.

Amen.