

John Sampson
"Getting to Yes"
Text: 1 Samuel 3:1 - 10
Preached at KVCC
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Will you pray with me?

God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you our rock and our redeemer. AMEN.

Our relationship to Jesus, and his message of love for all God's children, and what it might mean to our lives, is about to take a radical turn...if we let it.

It's as if our relationship with Jesus is going to accelerate from 0.0 to light speed in the span of a week or two.

Because in last week's reading we traveled with the magi to visit the seemingly unremarkable baby Jesus, and in next week's reading

thirty years will have elapsed in our story, and we will meet an adult Jesus, now called by some the Son of God. And he will ask us to drop everything, to drop our jobs, and our family commitments, and become his disciples.

All we have between these two interactions with the Christ is the reading we just heard, which isn't even about Jesus, or his message. It's a story that happens centuries before Jesus is born, before even his great ancestor David is born.

Yet, somehow this story of Samuel is supposed to prepare us to take on the mantle of discipleship when Jesus finally offers it. Somehow, this story of a boy trying to figure out who is calling him by name in the middle of the night is supposed to get us to yes, to get us to a place where we can say yes to Jesus' offer of discipleship with some sense of authenticity and confidence.

And I actually think it's perfect for the job.

Because it gets behind the scenes of how the mechanics of God calling us to be her people really works. Where the readings of the lectionary jump from a undistinguished baby Jesus to an adult Jesus in the blink of an eye, this story we hear about Samuel slows everything down, and shows us that responding to God's invitation takes time, and sensitivity, is fraught with confusion and false starts, but nonetheless leads to the possibility of intimacy with God, and service in the name of the Divine.

I also think it's a wonderful confluence of timelines that lets us hear this story about Samuel on the same weekend in which we celebrate the achievements, and the struggles, of Martin Luther King, Jr., the great American champion of the Civil Rights movement. I think it's a fortunate intersection of sacred stories that allows us to reflect upon

the biography of King at the same time we are considering what it means to become a disciple of Jesus.

I'm somewhat younger than many in this room this morning, and so that gives me a perspective that might be different from yours.

Growing up I only ever knew one Martin Luther King, Jr. I only ever knew the triumphant leader of the Civil Rights movement. I only ever knew the astonishing orator who told all of us, Euro and African American, that we as a nation would get to a promised land where the racial divisions that segregated us could be overcome some day. I only ever knew Martin Luther King as a fully formed and perfected disciple of Jesus. To me it was as if he came falling out of some heaven and crashed into the earth already having said "yes!" to Jesus' invitation to discipleship, to giving up everything, even ultimately his own life, to live out Christ's message in our deeply broken and divided nation.

But that way of thinking about Martin Luther King is blind to a long history of the commitment he had to making the United States a more perfect union for all of its people, black and white. It's a way of telling a story that ignores the doubt and missteps King experienced, and that the story of Samuel tells us all those who follow God's dream for her children will experience.

The story of Samuel starts as if it came from the Jim Crow America of the 1950s. It starts with alienation, failing light, and blindness. It starts when "the word of the Lord was rare" and "visions were not widespread." It starts when white supremacy ruled large parts of a nation committed to a dream of equality, but which actually lived the nightmare of racial oppression and segregation. How many white Americans' "eyesight had begun to grow dim so that [we] could not see" black Americans as our neighbors, as fellow citizens, and more radically, as even children of God?

The inner truth of the story of Samuel is revealed by the fact that it describes the dark experience of not only the nation of Israel millennia ago, but also the darkness that continues to plague our nation's racial history in an ongoing and multifaceted way today – even on yesterday's Next Door Keene posts about Black Lives Mattering.

It's into this dimness, into this time when "the word of the Lord was rare" and "visions were not widespread," that God called those who would prod our nation to move forward on our long journey to healing, and a more fully realized racial equality. It was in this dimness that God called Martin Luther King, and kept calling him over and over and over again. It was in this dimness that King kept responding, "Here I am!" But it was also within this dimness that King experienced confusion, and missteps, doubted God and was shunned by those whom he had served.

Like Samuel, King didn't always know who was speaking to him in the middle of the night. Was it God or was it his own heart? And like Samuel, King had started his journey with an inherited religion received from his fathers, only to experience later, in King's case years into his leadership of the American Civil Rights movement, what it actually meant to have a personal revelation of Divine intimacy.

In 1955 King said "Here I am!" and helped to organize and lead the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott, which integrated Montgomery's public bussing system.

But as the boycott ran longer than expected King had to deal with other leaders of the movement doubting his ability and resolve.

In 1957 King said “Here I am!” and with others, created the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which became one of the nation’s leading civil rights advocacy groups.

But it was in King’s pursuit of racial justice that his family begged him to give up his activism so that they could avoid the bombings and death threats that were leveled against them.

In 1963 King said “Here I am!” as leader of the SCLC and helped organize the March on Washington which again brought a focus to the ongoing challenges and inequalities faced by black Americans. During the march King gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, which shared a visionary roadmap for the future of the Civil Rights movement.

But it was also during his leadership that King doubted himself, thought he was inadequate, and became fearful.

In 1965 King said “Here I am!” again and helped organize the march from Selma to Montgomery, AL in support of the ongoing fight for Civil Rights among black Americans.

But it was also in his years of service that the civil rights movement experience financial woes, which King was suspected of benefitting from.

In 1967 King said “Here I am!” to help witness for an end to the Vietnam War by publically calling out the United States government’s involvement and conduct during the war.

But it was also as King called for justice and compassion around the world that he engaged in affairs outside of his marriage.

To me this record of King's achievements, and setbacks, is a lived expression of the truth contained in the story of Samuel's call to service by God. Samuel is called by a voice he does not recognize and so he associates it with what he is familiar with, in his case his mentor Eli. Don't we see an echo of this in King's story? Doesn't he hear God's invitation to lead a nation to a new reality of racial parity, only to doubt its author and fallback on the temptation to lead a more ordinary and comfortable family life? Doesn't King hear God's invitation to embody love for all people in a new way, only to mistake it occasionally for a call to satisfy his body's own desires? Instead of arriving on the national scene fully formed as a perfect disciple of Jesus, doesn't King show us an imperfect man who is deeply committed to following Christ's message over time, but who also fails and stumbles and is occasionally confused? Who keeps saying "Here I am" even if the voice he is responding to isn't the voice of God, but of his own human weakness?

Between the unremarkable baby Jesus and the adult Jesus asking us if we will be his disciples stands the story of the call of Samuel, stands the story of the ministry of Martin Luther King Jr.

But between these two images of Jesus also stands each of our stories of being called, and of the ways we respond to God's invitation to service in a world gone dim. Because the truth that is revealed in the poetry of Samuel's experience, and in the lived history of King, is a human truth, which means it is open to us too, and to our neighbors, and to all of God's children around the world, here and now.

Have you experienced a voice calling to you from the depths of your heart, but could never quite pin down where it was coming from?

Did you ever begin down a path in your life only to discover it wasn't quite the right one, and you had to change directions, or maybe even backtrack?

Did you ever think God was inviting you towards certain actions, only to realize the path before you was more a projection of your own wants and desires instead of a call from the Divine?

Did you ever hear the voice of God inviting you to something new, only to be too scared to respond?

I can say yes to all of these questions. Perhaps you can too.

The story of Samuel and the story of King tell us that we don't become disciples in one fell swoop. Discipleship, agreeing to live into Jesus' message, is an ascent of the heart, and mind, and body that is for most of us enacted over time. We become disciples when

we say, “Here I am!” in response to God’s invitation to shine the light of love in our dim world, even if we can only understand God’s call imperfectly, even if we can only respond imperfectly.

The stories of Samuel and King also show us that God, and Jesus, never make only one offer to join with them as disciples. They call us over and over again throughout our lives, even after we have changed the course of history, even after we have ignored their pleas, even after we have messed everything up, even when we have more days behind us than in front of us, we will be called again.

This is what it means to be loved.

So when that still small voice starts speaking in the deepest recesses of your heart I pray that you will have the courage to say “Here I am!” – just like Samuel, just like King. Because their story is our

story, and their failings are our failings, and their triumphs are our triumphs.

AMEN.