

17 Jan 2021

On Christian Vocation—

Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." (1 Samuel 3:10)

In the name of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It has been a long week. And it is going to be another long week.

This past week we saw the president of the United States impeached again. We learned more about the riots in our nation's capitol, that attack that coincided with the final confirmation of our new president. In this coming week, we will first remember Martin Luther King, Jr.; then, we will inaugurate our 46th president.

Martin Luther King Jr. was no stranger to political angst, national outrage, and unspeakable tragedy. One of the many tragedies that happened during his lifetime was the bombing of the 16th street Baptist Church, and the untimely, tragic death of four girls. At their funeral, King had this to say:

God still has a way of wringing good out of evil. And history has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive. The innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as a redemptive force that will bring new light to this dark city...And so I stand here to say this afternoon to all assembled here, that in spite of the darkness of this hour, we must not despair. We must not become bitter, nor must we harbor the desire to retaliate with violence. No, we must not lose faith in our white brothers. Somehow we must believe that the most misguided among them can learn to respect the dignity and the worth of human personality."

- Eulogy for the Martyred Children, Martin Luther King Jr.  
18 September 1963

King spoke compellingly to the church community- to his black brothers and sisters who had been targeted, not once, but over and over and over again in Birmingham by bombs,

discrimination, lynching, and ceaseless attacks on their human dignity. It wasn't just about their rights: their very lives were at stake- not even their churches were safe. Yet King meets this threat, this evil, with hope. "In spite of the darkness of this hour, we must not despair."

In spite of the darkness of this hour, we must not despair.

I had a bad tendency growing up to see Martin Luther King day as a secular holiday. Yes, it meant we got a day off of school, and yes, it meant that sometimes we had particular learning to do around issues of race and our national history; but I did not make the connection to my faith until college. In the church, we remember Martin Luther King on a different day. We remember him on April 4th; the day that he fell victim to racial violence, the day he was shot and killed in Memphis, Tennessee. In the church, we remember the saints when they died, because all too often, the saints died for their faith.

MLK believed that he had a vision. "In 1957, King was threatened by phone call, well after his family went to bed. Alone in his kitchen he wept and prayed. Then he heard God speaking to him and saying, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice,"

Furthermore, God promised never to leave him alone—"No, never alone."

Sounds like Samuel.

It sounds like Phillip, and Nathaniel.

In fact, God's call is present in all our readings this morning.

God's call to Samuel begins with the story of his birth. His mother, Hannah, was barren; in faith, she prayed to God, asking for a child and promised to dedicate her child to the service of the Lord. God granted her request and she became pregnant; she named her child Samuel and gave him up to serve at the temple in Jerusalem, serving a priest named Eli. Eli raised Samuel.

Eli had two adult sons who were priests. However, his sons were corrupt. Eli confronts them, but does nothing to them; so God condemns Eli alongside his sons. All this happens before our reading this morning; before Samuel is kept up, hearing the voice of God over and over again. Samuel wakes Eli twice, and then Eli realizes that Samuel is not hearing

things; he is hearing the Lord. Eli instructs the boy to say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'

Samuel receives a vision that is bitter and painful. He is told that Eli will be punished for the evil he allowed to grow under his roof. He is scared to tell Eli this vision, and Eli encourages him to tell the truth. Samuel tells Eli the truth, and Eli accepts it. "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him." Eli accepts that his priestly lineage has ended, and eventually Samuel will rise up in his place. Samuel tells the truth.

Philip and Nathaniel have a different experience. Jesus simply walks up to Philip and says "follow me." Philip then goes to his friend Nathaniel and tells him about Jesus. Hearing about it second-hand, Nathaniel has his doubts. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Whatever Nathaniel was thinking, it sounds a bit like a stereotype to me. However, Nathaniel chose to go see anyways. He pushed through his stereotype, and Nathaniel comes to Jesus and then he sees that Jesus is good.

Four different call stories. King's, Samuels, Philip, and Nathaniel. Yet despite their particular circumstances, they all teach us about one vocation: Knowing God. Following Christ. Becoming Disciples.

You see, we all have our various calls in the world. We are called to be children first; then students, perhaps siblings. We are called to be athletes, then we are called to our various jobs. Sometimes, we may not feel a call by God to do the work that is in front of us, but we do it for other reasons- to put food on our table and keep the roof over our heads. Then as we grow older, we are called to be parents; perhaps grandparents or godparents too. Some are called to be single and they are no less for that. Some find vocations outside of their livelihoods; in their service to the community, or in their various ministries in the church. We all have many vocations that we balance.

However, as Christians, we believe there is one Vocation that balances them all; one vocation that directs and orders the others; it is our vocation as Christians. We make vows in our Baptism, or our caretakers make vows on our behalf and promise to raise us up into those vows, just like Hannah does. We renounce the powers of evil, and we take on a new loyalty to Jesus Christ. We promise to follow and obey him as our Lord. We trust him. We believe that he saves us. In one definitive moment, we accept the calling of Christ. We join

in this community of repentant sinners, and we proclaim our new allegiance to a new kingdom- the Kingdom of God.

Martin Luther King reminded those gathered in Birmingham of their Christian vocation. Their vocation was not to turn bitter, nor to retaliate with violence; his counsel was to believe that they too, can be converted. They too, can be forgiven. That is the piece of the conversation that is lost today: forgiveness. For if God had not forgiven each of us for the various ways in which we have sinned, continue to sin, and will sin again, we would not be here. We would not be part of this odd community, where we ask God every Sunday to “forgive our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” Are we not serious when we pray “thy kingdom come?” Do we not mean for God’s will to be done?

It is easy these days to pick a political side and stick to it.

It is hard to stay with our Christian Vocation and seek the Kingdom.

It is easy these days to demonize the other side; harder is seeing the dignity in every human being, and much harder is extending forgiveness.

It is easy to lose ourselves in the things of this world, not remembering in our prayers to give us our daily bread, we really are dependent on God entirely.

Our Christian Vocation is not easy.

However, living into our Christian Vocation is possible. Standing up for righteousness and justice is possible. Speaking the Truth is possible. Pushing through our stereotypes is possible. Proclaiming our true allegiance to God is possible. And it all starts here. It starts in prayer. It starts when we pray the way Jesus taught us and recognize the way that Jesus taught us to pray is truthful.

It starts when we listen for the call of God, and when respond “Speak, for your servant is listening.”