

Epiphany 2B Sermon, January 18, 2009

Lections: 1 Samuel 3:1-10; Ps.139: 1-5, 12-17; 1 Corin. 6:12-20; John 1: 43-51

Attending a movie last night I was surprised to see quotes from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. included in the pre-movie images on the screen. They are inspiring words, both beautiful and difficult. Remembering the many times I had to travel in weather like today to attend the annual Martin Luther King breakfasts in Worcester, Ma. when the door locks froze and I had to drive with one hand, holding the door which would not close. The commemorations were beautiful and difficult as we realized how far we had yet to travel to reach King's dream of God's beloved community.

What did you notice about today's texts? Discrimination and assumptions in the gospel, a sort of spiritual famine in the Hebrew testament, persons across the age span, a continuation of last week's text when Jesus heard God's voice? This week we celebrate the week for Christian unity, Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy, and some of us will be filled with hope as a new president takes office in the United States.

Someone has said that the gospel is bad news before it is good news. That sobering thought had some resonance in me as I see how often the people of God have been called into a new reality and have judged it unclearly and even actively resisted it. The path is beautiful and yet difficult.

Eli might represent the tradition of status quo. He no longer expects to hear God's voice; his sons are a disappointment and he will be judged for their failure. Samuel, the child of promise whose mother Hannah apprenticed him at the temple in gratitude for his life, is awakened by a voice calling him. Initially he thinks it is Eli but eventually is told that it is likely that God has something to say to him. "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Samuel is open to the possibility that God might speak, have a word for him. This open stance toward the Light breaking in is in direct contrast to the bus signage in the UK right now- "There is probably no God. Get on with life and enjoy it." I would rather be a listener, expecting a word or a dream or a vision.

That listening process is a spiritual discipline, needed especially when we are not open to the Holy, when our expectations and assumptions keep us from learning anything new. John Bell, the hymnodist from the Iona community speaks of a time when a seminar speaker challenged a diverse group of folks concerning the text from Samuel. "The leader made a point...that the voices we hear when we are young reverberated in us throughout our lives, sometimes enabling or disabling us in particular activities...the group were asked to describe the voices which they personally heard echoing through the corridors of time into their present existence. ..one by one people recounted the voices and phrases that still belittled them." Bell goes on to speak about those who had been told as children that they couldn't sing, couldn't draw, couldn't become the person they wanted to be. The leader spoke of how often we have been held captive because we were not able to mount a defense, could not argue against the criticism, became captive until someone could counteract the opinion....sometimes it took thirty or fifty years. Sometimes it takes thirty or fifty years to unlearn the bias about others.

Samuel was fortunate that he was called into something honorable as a child which shaped his faith in himself and in God. This is beautiful and yet would prove to be difficult. Eli demanded the truth and so helped the child in his journey.

I think of those African Americans and African Canadians who were told that they were less than human. Who still listen to racism on a daily basis. Who may not have the rhetoric of a Dr. King or of the poet Langston Hughes. Who may not have the benefit of a Harvard education or a Charter of Rights. Perhaps we have come some way in unlearning racism but there is still cause for concern, concern that despite our human capacity to reach beyond ourselves and encompass the common good, we too often “blaze a bold downhill path from the high ground of human collective toward the tight den of self.”¹ Sometimes individual freedom seems more valuable than the larger goal of freedom for the whole community.

Into the tight notion of assumptions comes Jesus greeting the man under the fig tree who assumes that Jesus, coming from where he did, with the family and tribe he had, could not be more than was expected...is that true of folks from Texas, or the United States or people of color, or certain types/denominations of Christians? Are all Catholics a certain way? Or Mennonites? Or Uniteds? Our expectations can close us off from the true experience of ‘otherness’ and it takes work until we can see our differences as gifts to a whole community. Not all communities are alike. Nor all people. This seems like a basic concept in some sense. Jesus tells Nathaniel about another time and place, another ladder, when Jacob had discovered that the place of the stone pillow is the threshold of God. And Nathaniel is willing to move, to go beyond himself and his previous bias. As the weeks of the gospel narrative unfold we will see that the disciples are about a task both beautiful and difficult.

I don’t know what grabs your hope this week. Perhaps light shines for you from prophets and folks of courage who have become great leaders. Perhaps the light is in the willingness of ordinary person content with his life under vine and fig tree who is still able to be open to someone who has an offering of new life. All of us carry the voices of tradition and assumptions about others. It is God who breaks through our complacency with a call for us, for our parish, for our community. How many times have we been called without responding? Amen+

The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera

Today’s blessing comes from Dr. King

“Now unto him who is able to keep you from falling and lift us from the dark valley of despair to the bright mountain of hope, from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy, to God be power and authority for ever and ever. Amen.”

Also included was Langston Hughes’ poem “Mother to Son”

¹ Barbara Kingsolver

“Well, son, I’ll tell you:
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.
It’s had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I’ve been a-climbin’ on,
And reachin’ landin’s.
And turnin’ corners,
And sometimes goin’ in the dark
Where there ain’t been no light.
So, boy, don’t you turn back.
Don’t you set down on the steps
‘cause you find it kinder hard.
Don’t you fall now----
For I’ve still going’, honey,
I’ve still climbin’
And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.”