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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, January 17, 2021

2 Epiphany, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[Genesis 1:1-5](#)

[Acts 19:1-7](#)

[Mark 1:4-11](#)

[Psalm 29](#)

In those days the word of the LORD was rare; visions were not widespread.

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He probably didn't expect God to say *that* to him.

He'd grown up there in the temple, consecrated as an infant by his mother to live and serve there. He saw his parents just once a year, so Eli the old priest was probably the closest thing to a father figure he had. So when he heard a voice calling him in the middle of the night, of course he thought it was Eli; until it turned out to be the voice of the LORD.

A lot of times when this story is read, it stops with Samuel's answer. "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening." What a great place to stop: it's inspiring. Suitable for framing. Would that we all would be as receptive to hear God's call. But stopping there leaves out the awkward part. Because what God tells him is to pronounce judgment against Eli, his mentor.

Eli wasn't personally corrupt. But he was negligent. His two adult sons, also priests, had turned the temple into a personal enrichment operation. They took the best portions of the people's sacrifices, the parts that were supposed to be reserved for God, for themselves. Meanwhile they sexually exploited the women who served as temple assistants. The outward forms of the institution remained: the dignity and grandeur of the temple and its rituals. But inwardly it had been hollowed out, with those who were supposed to be serving the people instead ignoring them and exploiting them for their own comfort and enjoyment.

It's a good story for us to read in our time, a time when we see so clearly the corruption and dysfunction that have set into our own sacred institutions: outward forms of dignity and grandeur cloaking cynical manipulation and greed. Years of gleeful, casual self-enrichment by public officials sworn to uphold the public interest. Officeholders sworn to defend the Constitution using their platforms to undermine it. Two Wednesdays ago the outward grandeur was broken for a time by a rampaging mob as the consequences of that cynicism began to come home to roost—and yet by that very evening we were once again seeing more than a hundred representatives and several senators genteelly following the rules of parliamentary procedure to try to overthrow a free and fair election. Meanwhile these white-marbled institutions of our government are increasingly incapable of addressing the real issues that cry out in people's lives: fighting a pandemic, fighting poverty and racial inequality, fighting the ever-accelerating clear and present danger of climate change.

God called Samuel as a prophet and gave him his first task: to name what was broken. To call out the wrong. And in times of dysfunction that's often the first thing that's needed. It was a time when the word of the LORD was rare, and visions were not widespread. The first step toward health is diagnosing what's sick. And so Samuel became the voice of reproach. He saw what was wrong and he named it. It's an important quality in times when visions are rare.

But sometimes we need visions too.

We heard a different kind of call story from the Gospel of John today. It's the call of Nathanael. Philip finds Nathanael and breathlessly tells him about Jesus. And Nathanael's response is pretty cynical! "A messiah from Nazareth? Give me a break! Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

We might imagine Jesus rebuking Nathanael for his prejudice and dismissiveness. But instead Jesus seems to see something in Nathanael. Maybe it's even Nathanael's plainspokenness, his willingness to come right out and say what he thinks, that Jesus picks up on when he says, "Here's a real Israelite in whom there is no guile!" It's as if Jesus sees what's wrong in Nathanael—but also sees what Nathanael can be. He has a vision for Nathanael.

And Nathanael responds. Enthusiastically. Something about Jesus calls to him and he acclaims Jesus as the King of Israel. And then Jesus offers even more. “You think this is something? You’re going to see greater things than this.” And Jesus gives Nathanael a vision of heaven opened, of Jesus himself serving as the ladder between heaven and earth. He moves Nathanael still further, from thinking about Jesus as a worldly king, to glimpsing what Jesus is truly about: setting the whole cosmos right, reconciling the whole creation to its God.

That’s a vision to captivate and energize.

Sometimes we need to name what’s broken so we can clearly see the wrong. And then on top of just naming what’s broken, we also need a vision of what can be, because it’s that positive vision, that dream, that can actually transform people’s hearts and energize people’s bodies. It worked for Nathanael, who grew past his first prejudice, became a disciple, and ended up as a witness to the resurrection.

This weekend, in the midst of our current political crisis, we are commemorating a leader from another time of crisis. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a twentieth-century prophet who both named what was broken and also had a vision of what could be. Like Samuel, he experienced a call from God that turned out to be an uncomfortable one. Dr. King was called to call out what was evil. To name the brokenness at the heart of a nation that called itself free. And he grounded that rebuke in a vision of what that nation might be, of what the world might be. He spoke of the Beloved Community—a society not just free of the most obvious evils like segregated schools or public facilities, but a society where poverty, hunger, and homeless would not exist because they would be considered intolerable.

Where are you called to name the world's brokenness today?

And what is the vision that animates you?

Today as we look at the brokenness of our nation and our world we need to stand firm against lies, against the subversion of our democracy, against white supremacy. And we do so in the name of a greater vision—the vision Dr. King called the Beloved Community and Archbishop Desmond Tutu calls “God’s dream.” It’s a vision of an earth at peace, without hunger and without war, where no one’s flourishing depends on another person’s pain, where we live in harmony with our environment and the species around us. It’s a vision of a just society. And for us as Christians even that vision is grounded in an even greater one. A vision of heaven and earth joined, with Jesus Christ as the ladder that connects them. A vision of angels and archangels and all the company of heaven and all the company of earth united in thanks and praise forever.