

Epiphany 3 B
I Samuel 3:1-10
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18
John 1:43-51

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
Wimberley UMC
Notes not for publication
January 18, 2009

The theologian Karl Barth wrote that Christian preachers should craft their sermons with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. All I can say about that is that it would be easy for me to keep us here three days straight, with a sermon like that, with all that's happening around us in the world. We've got a historic inauguration coming up on Tuesday, whatever your political leanings. And while a unilateral ceasefire may be in the works, I personally continue to be very distressed about the Israeli invasion of Gaza. Our United Methodist missionary in Jerusalem has been sending numerous emails every day with reports from Christian Palestinian pastors and both Arab and Israeli peace groups, and these reports highlight both the devastation being suffered by the civilians of Gaza and the devastation of broader prospects for peace. Moderate Palestinian voices are being drowned out by cries for change and the reality that moderation has achieved no gains for them. And moderate and liberal Israeli voices find their ground eroding as Hamas continues its commitment to violent resistance.

Then there's the economy. In Gaza, it's estimated that the cost of the current damage to the infrastructure, which was in horrible shape even before the invasion, will be more than \$1.3 billion dollars. Yet flip to a different page in the newspaper, and we find that Bernie Madoff has run a \$50 billion dollar scam, and sits, free on bail, in his \$7 million Manhattan penthouse. It's obscene and infuriating and all sorts of other words.

Businesses and people are hurting, and the finger-pointing has only begun.

All these things are happening in the context this weekend of our observance of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. Over the nearly 41 years since his death, we have inherited a sweetened, mass-marketed version of King's life and his vision, a glossed-over version of tolerance that seems easy to achieve. But the fact is that King's legacy presents us with a profound challenge. Far from just teaching us all to get along, King prodded the church to lose its fear and complacency and to become an agent for the transformation of the world, for the sake of God's justice. As much as we might like it to be true, the issue of race is not settled and healed over in this country. We still place great stock in violence as a tool for achieving peace. The church still takes the road of the status quo and stays quiet when we should speak out. So every year I try again to seek the challenge of King's life's work, for me and for the church, as part of this society.

This year I've thought about the call of God upon Martin Luther King. How did he come to do what he did, to lead so firmly and clearly from the principle of non-violence when so much hateful violence swirled around him? I think the scriptures for today intersect in an interesting fashion with the life of this remarkable Christian. For in each text we've read, we hear the call of God, reaching out to us and the world, inviting and beckoning, challenging, even. And while you and I are not Martin Luther King, we do profess to be called by God, and we likely cannot imagine the tasks God might be imagining for us to undertake. So how do we hear and respond to the call of God in our lives?

I think it's different with each person. We can look at the stories from scripture today for a couple of examples. In the passage from I Samuel, God comes to the boy Samuel during the night and calls out his name. Samuel was a boy, dedicated by his mother to serve God, and he assisted Eli with the tasks of the temple. He didn't know the Lord, the text says, or in other words, he hadn't had any sort of personal encounter with God. In fact, the word of the Lord was scarce in general; apparently nobody was listening. Even the sons of Eli, the High Priest of Israel, were corrupt, stealing from the offerings the people made, eating the meat intended to honor God. Maybe we can imagine such corruption. It was in such a time that Samuel heard a voice calling his name in the night three different times, as he lay on the floor of the temple. And each time he got up and reported to Eli—who else could it be?

I think sometimes God does use the voices of other people to call to us. Like when you hear for the third time in one week that you've been a big help to somebody, when all you've done is just be yourself. Like when a call goes out from church or community for some need that you know immediately you could help with, and you feel moved to do something about it. Like when you're invited to do something or go someplace new, something you'd really rather not do, but you just can't forget about it, either.

People will call to us to tell us all kinds of things, and some of it is absolutely not from God. But even in things that aren't of God, I believe God can speak, through the conviction of our hearts that something before us is not right. There are many stories of people who have pursued certain careers and awakened one day to the knowledge

that they have to find another line of work, that what they're doing is killing them or their families, or that it's just not the kind of mark they want to make in the world.

That conviction can be the voice of God, too. So how do we know? How do we know when it's God talking and when it's not? As we try to listen for God's voice, in the events of the world around us, in the voices of other people, and finally inside ourselves, what are some standards we can use?

I'm sure somebody's written a book on this kind of thing, and it might have been good for me to read that book, but I didn't. I'd also really like to hear your answers to this question. But here's what I came up with as a set of standards to apply to the voice we hear in the middle of the night: Does it affirm us, who we are? Does it challenge us to do a new thing? And is it life-giving, to us and to the world?

The call of God upon us will first be an affirming call. That doesn't mean that God will affirm everything we do; it does mean that who we are as creatures of the one true God is good, because God has deemed it to be so. And so when we listen for the call of God, it does not mean listening for the same old thing we always tell ourselves, the things we think God would say to us, given the opportunity—like how we're not getting it quite right, and how we really need to straighten up and do better and be more productive and committed, and then maybe God can love us. Not those things. I mean listening to the deep word of God for us, the kind of word we've heard about the past couple of Sundays, calling us beloved and precious, calling us where we are, as broken, fearful people, yet as exactly the ones God seeks to claim. God calls us, not because we've proven ourselves worthy, not because of how hard we've worked, but

because God is Creator and has called the creation good. And that means us. There may be things we need to do differently in our lives, but who we are is what God thought up, and therefore we are enough. Busted up, mistake-prone, self-centered—none of this can keep God from calling us beloved.

The call of God will affirm us, but it will also challenge us. It might call us to go to some foreign place, or it might just call us to reach out in love to somebody we just can't stand. The call of God might invite us to encounter our greatest fear, up close. It might call us to rethink a principle we've based our whole lives on. It might ask us to risk the image or position we've so carefully created for ourselves. It almost certainly will ask us to give up control, one way or another. We see it in the call story from John's gospel. Jesus calls Philip, and he just gets up and goes. But Nathanael is a different story. Philip tells him about Jesus—"we've found the one we've been waiting for"—and Nathanael starts right away with the objections. He says, oh, right, like the Messiah's going to come out of Nazareth, that backwater place. We do that—we think of reasons for not paying attention, for not listening, for not even letting a challenge in the front door.

Yet the call of God is persistent, as you may know from personal experience. Sometimes it's overpowering, and sometimes it patiently waits for us to come around, but it generally doesn't go away. In Nathanael's case, Philip responded to his cynicism with an invitation: Come and see. Nathanael went to see, maybe reluctantly, and he found that Jesus already knew who he was. "Where did you get to know me?" he asked. And Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."

The call of God, not just of Philip, came to Nathanael and would not leave him be; God did not force him, but he also could not escape God, as we heard in the words of the psalmist—"where can I hide from you, and where can I flee from your presence?"

Finally what we find when we turn and listen to the affirming, challenging call of God is that it is life-giving, for us and for the world. It might be hard for us, it might require something of us that we would rather not give, but in the end, God's call to us will lead us to life. And it will lead us to serve and bear life to others as well. King is our best example of this today, for even though his commitment to the work God laid before him led him to his death, we can glean from his speech in Memphis the night before that he left this life fulfilled, that he knew and trusted God as faithful. And that's finally the goal of our lives, after all, to rest in the knowledge and love of God as all we need. We find life when we heed the life-giving call of God.

So listen for God's voice, brothers and sisters. Listen as you watch the news or read the Bible. Listen in your prayers once you've said all you need to say. Listen as you write in a journal or talk things out with a friend. Listen to your dreams and to your children. For every single one of us is called, and we can help each other figure out what that means. God is speaking your name, to affirm you and challenge you and give you life. And when we respond, when we answer, "Here I am," the world will be different as a result. Thanks be to God.

Change paraments to green
Hit Bishop's brother died – service in Conroe, buried in Baytown

"If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority." (*Strength to Love*, 1963)

"The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. ... Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."
(*Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* 1967, p. 62)

Prayer was a wellspring of strength and inspiration during the Civil Rights Movement. Throughout the movement, we prayed for greater human understanding. We prayed for the safety of our compatriots in the freedom struggle. We prayed for victory in our nonviolent protests, for brotherhood and sisterhood among people of all races, for reconciliation and the fulfillment of the Beloved Community.

For my husband, Martin Luther King, Jr. prayer was a daily source of courage and strength that gave him the ability to carry on in even the darkest hours of our struggle.

I remember one very difficult day when he came home bone-weary from the stress that came with his leadership of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In the middle of that night, he was awakened by a threatening and abusive phone call, one of many we received throughout the movement. On this particular occasion, however, Martin had had enough.

After the call, he got up from bed and made himself some coffee. He began to worry about his family, and all of the burdens that came with

our movement weighed heavily on his soul. With his head in his hands, Martin bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud to God: "Lord, I am taking a stand for what I believe is right. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I have nothing left. I have come to the point where I can't face it alone.

Later he told me, "At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear a voice saying: 'Stand up for righteousness; stand up for truth; and God will be at our side forever.'" When Martin stood up from the table, he was imbued with a new sense of confidence, and he was ready to face anything.

--Coretta Scott King from "Standing in the Need of Prayer," as published by The Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster.
Reprinted at godweb.org/kingprayers.

An Affirmation Based on the Writings of Dr. King

I refuse to believe that we are unable to influence the events which surround us.

I refuse to believe that we are so bound to racism and war, that peace, brotherhood and sisterhood are not possible.

I believe there is an urgent need for people to overcome oppression and violence, without resorting to violence and oppression.

I believe that we need to discover a way to live together in peace, a way which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of this way is love.

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. I believe that right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant.

I believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.

I believe that what self-centered people have torn down, other-centered people can build up.

By the goodness of God at work within people, I believe that brokenness can be healed. "And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together, and everyone will sit under their own vine and fig tree, and none shall be afraid."

