

Sunday, January 15, 2012
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Whose is the loudest voice you hear?

When you look in the mirror or lie awake at night what tapes play in your head?

Do you hear the condemning voice of an early critic telling you that you are just not good enough?

Do you hear the beating drum of judgment rendered by colleagues or peers?

Do you hear the pounding bass of advertising telling you that you just don't measure up?

Or do you hear the voice of God calling you to discipleship?

Would you know God's voice?

Is there room in your crowded mind to hear the whisper of God?

Today's readings give us two distinct stories of call and response.

Young Samuel's first response to God's call is to assume that he is being summoned to serve his master, Eli.

His conditioned response when he awakes is to run and see what Eli needs.

When he finally rests in God's presence, he is called to a very difficult task.

He is summoned to render judgment on the behavior of Eli's family.

To answer God's call he will have to risk his security.

Eli might not like what Samuel has to say.

Samuel has to make a deliberate choice to share God's message.

In John's gospel, we are witness to the calling by Jesus of Phillip and Nathaniel.

We know little about these two disciples, except that Phillip was from the same town as Andrew and Peter – the first disciples called.

We don't know what Philip was doing when Jesus commanded "Follow Me."

We only know that he did.

Something in the interaction inspired Philip to go and retrieve Nathaniel, exclaiming that the one whom Moses and the Prophets had expected had arrived in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Nathaniel's initial reaction was one of disdain, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Only a few moments later we find him honoring Jesus as "the son of God, the king of Israel."

In each of these circumstances, Samuel, Philip and Nathaniel; the first response to God's call is in the context of the familiar environment.

Only when they open themselves up to something more, something, perhaps unknown, do they truly understand that they are in the presence of the divine.

How often are our responses to situations restricted to that which we know?

What type of opportunities do we deprive ourselves of simply by assuming that there is nothing new for us to learn?

There is always more.

When we stay locked in our own perspective we run the risk of narrowing our vision of God's kingdom.

Tomorrow we honor the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. a person from our own lifetime who called us to look at the world from a different perspective.

In his short life – less than forty years, Martin Luther King organized and led nonviolent actions that changed the world. He founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, published multiple books and essays calling attention to the injustice present in American life.

The titles of his books tell a story in themselves:

The Measure of A Man, Strength To Love, Stride Toward Freedom; The Trumpet of Conscience, Where Do We Go From Here? and Why We Can't Wait.

In *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*, (published in 1967) he challenged “Let us therefore not think of our movement as one that seeks to integrate into all the existing values of American society. Let us be those creative dissenters who will call our beloved country to a higher destiny, to a new plateau of compassion, to a more noble expression of humanness.”

This is our call – to think beyond our own lives to imagine a world of peace and justice.

King was a religious man. His belief in equal rights was rooted in scripture.

He struggled with his sense of call, knowing that to answer it would put his life and his family in jeopardy.

His personal notes included a reflection on his involvement with the civil rights movement.

Early in his pastorate at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church he wrote:

“What should I do? I have a wife and a young family. The dangers of speaking out against racism are real and often end tragically. This is my first pastorate in a silk-stocking Baptist church that caters to black middle-class values. What will they think if I come in and develop a reputation as a rabble-rouser? The members of Dexter Avenue are the black bourgeois who believe that black people can make it if they "study hard, work hard, save their money and stay out of trouble.”

Martin, like Samuel, had a message to deliver that was not going to be well received.

He knew the cost. He had to wrestle with this call.

As an ordained minister he had an obligation to speak the truth to power, to fight for what he believed.

We are called to do no less.

I have chosen a book for our Lenten Reading called *Belief*. It is a compilation of essays on the reason for faith.

In one essay, entitled, “Differences Make a Difference” Os Guinness argues that “truth, like meaning as a whole, is not for us to create but for us to discover.”

It is there – we just have to look for it. He continues, “Those who put their faith in God do so for all sorts of good reasons, but the very best reason is that they are finally, utterly, and incontrovertibly convinced that the faith in which they put their confidence is truth.”

This is what we seek.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, “One word of truth outweighs the entire world.” When we know what is true, the voices commanding our attention fall away. When our lives are centered in God we are unfettered.

We are free.

As Americans, we name freedom as one of our most important fundamental values.

Defining what freedom is, however, is not an easy task.

What does freedom mean to you?

Do you think in terms of “freedom from” most often meaning privacy, no one telling you what to do?

Or “freedom for” providing opportunity and creativity for each person to discover their true, genuine self?

Guinness posits that “Without truth there is no genuine freedom and fulfillment.”

Martin Luther King’s life testified to this.

He knew that as long as people were living lives restricted by bigotry and hate, they would be unable to recognize their God-given potential.

This is true for both the oppressed and the oppressors.

If you harbor hate in your heart, you are compromised.

You are less than whole.

Throughout his life, King maintained the belief that social, cultural, and political transformation could and would take place on both the individual and communal level.

Martin Luther King would have turned 83 years old today.

Listen to his words in the context of today’s world.

Know that a prophet spoke to us then and perhaps we did not listen, but we can listen now.

“Even though we must face difficulties today and tomorrow, I still have a dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.”

“I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.”

“This will be the day when all of God’s children will be able to sing with new meaning—‘my country, ’tis of thee; sweet land of liberty; of the I sing; land where my fathers died; land of the pilgrim’s pride; from every mountainside, let freedom ring.’”

“When we allow freedom to ring from every town and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children—black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants—will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual”:

“Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”

My friends, let the voice of God call out to you over all others.

Dare to listen and respond. Dare to dream. Choose carefully whom you follow.

Make a commitment to step outside of your familiar world – to learn something new each day.

Envision a future where peace and justice and freedom are available to all.

Jesus calls us to work tirelessly to secure that future for generations to come.

It is what we must do.