

“Grounded in God, Freed to...”— based on Psalm 139 & I Samuel 3:1-20
Preached by Rev. Jonathan New
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We're so used to reading the Bible for guidance we often fail to notice something else — its comedy. Take Samuel, the boy apprentice to the priest, Eli. The blind master's in his room; Samuel's lying down in the Temple minding the lamp. Suddenly, Samuel hears his name called, assumes it's Eli, and goes to see what he wants. Eli sends him back to bed. Again this happens, and you can hear the exasperation in the old priest's words as he sends him back to bed again. When Samuel comes a third time, to Eli's credit, the penny finally drops. But he's a priest, and the fact that it takes him so long to figure out what's going on doesn't reflect well on his spiritual abilities. This is comedy — a spiritual comedy of errors.

It's also a story of perception and misperception. I'm reminded of images like these. [Note: An optical illusion image was shown that, from one point of view looked like an urn and from another point of view looked like to faces staring at one another.] What do you see? Some of us see the urn, some see the faces. But to see both, we sometimes have to be shown the alternate image. That's true for Samuel, too. Once Eli finally knows Samuel isn't just mistaken about hearing his name called, he's able to perceive the only other source of the address — God. And only when Eli explains to that it's God who's speaking that the boy's spiritual awareness awakens.

This is not unlike Martin Luther King, Jr.'s experience. King often confessed that, if he'd known all that being a civil rights activist entailed he might have taken a different path. But, after being chosen to lead the Montgomery bus boycott, being assaulted and arrested, having his house bombed, he saw the movement as greater than himself. He said: "As I became involved, and as people began to derive inspiration from their involvement, I realized that the choice leaves your own hands." All that was happening, the way others looked to him, made him feel called, and, like Samuel, he could say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Their spiritual awareness awakened, Samuel and Martin were grounded in God, carrying them into and through difficult moments. Though he'd had death threats, on April 3, 1968, King spoke in support of black Memphis sanitation workers striking for safer working conditions, higher wages, and equal treatment. He told how, years before, at a New York City book signing, a demented woman stabbed him. The next day, the *New York Times* reported that the tip of the blade was on the edge of King's aorta, and that if he'd sneezed he would have died. King told his audience how happy he was he hadn't sneezed because he would have missed: students sitting in at lunch counters who were really standing up for the best in the American Dream; black people in Montgomery arousing the nation's conscience, birthing the Civil Rights Bill; and telling the world about his grand dream.

King claimed his calm was due, not to him, but to God's power working through him. "Throughout this struggle for racial justice, " he wrote, "[a] constant prayer life and feeling of dependence on God have given me the feeling that I have divine companionship in the struggle.... God can give an inner peace." King faced setbacks and dangers, but he knew God was a divine companion — hemming him in, behind and before — giving him what he needed to advance the Civil Rights struggle.

One of my favorite slogans for non-violent protest in the service of justice is from a sign carried by a civil rights marcher in Selma, Alabama in 1965: "Risk in faith, decide in hope, suffer the consequences in love." Now, we know that's not so easy. But awareness of what God is calling us to be and do, and sensing God's presence that can help us overcome our fear, helps. Samuel's story and King's story remind us that a spiritual life is best lived as dialogue not monologue; that our spirits may find their deepest peace and we may be made more than what we would have been when we know ourselves to have been addressed.

I've been thinking how, when King said, "The arc of history is long, and bends toward justice," this wasn't just an historical observation; it was a theological assertion. He was referring to the Living Word of God. He was talking about the Still Speaking God, ever prompting us to see where injustice lies and to address it, to see situations of need and address them.

So how do we nudge the trajectory of history toward justice? I think it requires a grounding in God and believing God's got something to say to us. Now, it sounds strange hearing, "God spoke to me, called me." And it can feel strange trying to hear God's word. At first, Samuel didn't believe it, nor did King. But — think about it — God kept addressing them and they got confirmation of this Living Word... from others. In community, we ensure it's God's call, God's prompting, listening and testing out with one another what we believe we're hearing and how we're being moved to act on the side of justice and loving-kindness.

Granted, such grounding won't shield us from hardship. Just one day after that Memphis speech, an assassin's bullet took King's life. But it made all the difference in his work for justice — organizing the Montgomery bus boycott; inspiring him to give his "I Have a Dream" speech; giving him confidence to launch voter registration drives; and courage to defy death threats and stand against any injustice. This spiritual clarity never failed King because he affirmed with the psalmist: "I come to the end — I am still with you." So, King ended that last speech saying he wasn't afraid. "I don't know what will happen now," he said. "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter. Because I've been to the mountaintop and looked over. I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land."

Justice has been defined as "Love acting at a distance." That's why it's so hard to get a handle on— it feels removed from us. But it's not so removed. 40 years after King's death, we see how the arc of history has slowly bent toward justice. But it could never have come to pass were it not for King's countless followers and the multitude of others in subsequent generations who felt their hearts stirred, inspired to align themselves with the cause of racial justice and God's way.

We think of ourselves as people who decide and strive. But our faith beckons us see ourselves as summoned, empowered, and promised. Sometimes God's claim on us will seem difficult. Yet, let's face it, the uncalled life is boring. To be the called, commissioned, and examined is a great gift. Augustine said, "our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee," meaning that when we know ourselves to be addressed by God our aimless wandering can take on purposefulness. Being grounded in God — by listening with our heads and our hearts, then testing out this awareness with others — we can be released by the Still Speaking God to nudge the trajectory of history further toward justice and a land of promise; unbound to take the empathy we feel for others and our inspiration to respond with compassionate acts a step

further; unshackled to extend our love beyond the tangible needs we see around us and to seek justice; and, along the way, freed to find the meaningfulness and completion that comes from answering the call to something greater than ourselves. I don't know what those causes may be, but grounded in God and in discernment together, we can risk in faith, decide in hope, and suffer the consequences in love, no matter what they are.