

“Clear Vision for Dim Times”
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Martin Luther King Sunday
Presbyterian Church in Leonia

1 Samuel 3:1-20
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

Our story from 1 Samuel tells us of clear vision for dim times. The scripture begins by telling us “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” The next verse tells us of the priest Eli, whose eyesight had become dim, so that he could not see, and he was lying down in his room. In the next room lay Samuel; “and the lamp of God had not yet gone out.”

Into this time when visions were not widespread, a time of dim eyesight, a time when the lamp of God had all but flickered out, God called the boy Samuel into prophecy. God gave Samuel the role of being God’s eyes, to help the people Israel to see God’s ways and be faithful to them. Not only would God help the people see through Samuel; they would hear too. For what God was about to do would “make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle,” the scripture says.

We find ourselves in dim times, too, in need of clear vision. Let us turn our gaze to the prophet Samuel, and on to one who came along much later in the prophetic tradition, Martin Luther King, Jr, to find clear vision for these dim times.

Soon after Samuel received the call from God, Israel goes into battle against the Philistines. Israel loses and flees, and the Ark of God becomes captured by the Philistines. Upon hearing this sad news, the elderly Eli fell backward in despair, and died. For those of you who watched with disbelief, disorientation, and grief as the Capitol building was stormed and ransacked by a violent mob, perhaps you can imagine how the Ark-- which contained the Ten Commandments and laws of Torah, and upon which they believed the Glory of God rested-- represented for Israel the soul of the people. Dim times for them, indeed. You might imagine how lost the people felt after that.

When we are feeling lost, there are different options for how we might be found. One option is to hide beneath the cloak of somebody else’s authority. We think that through this person, we might find ourselves. This is the response Israel took. They decided that after the time of priests, prophets, and judges, what they really needed was a king. Yes, a king would fix their problems. The elders approached Samuel and demanded that he appoint for them a king, so they could “be like other nations.” What Samuel understood, however, is that once Israel became reliant on a king, they would become less reliant on God. He cautioned them against kingship, saying:

“These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots... He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. ... He will take...the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.”

No matter. The people wanted their king, and that's who they got-- in the person of Saul, who in his first years led Israel to several military victories. However, King Saul disobeys God's instruction, and Samuel announces his rejection by God. Over time, King Saul's jealousy, greed, and paranoia take hold of him. His fits of madness lead to more errors in his rule. Israel becomes even more lost than they were before they found their king. In the end, Saul dies by his own sword, and Israel receives a new king-- King David. Samuel guided David as a boy, and later the prophet Nathan guided him. However, like most of the kings that followed him, King David often closed his eyes and ears to the truth the prophets spoke, at great cost to Israel. If only the people listened to the truth the prophets saw.

Another response we might choose when we are lost is to announce it: to name our vulnerability, and enlist others in helping us to be seen. The power of recovery groups comes in sharing your vulnerability and brokenness before a larger community, which receives you in grace and helps you find your way. It is only when you can name your powerlessness that you can find your strength.

King helped Black people name their social and economic vulnerability-- a vulnerability that came through no fault of their own, but through the intentional oppression of Black people by white people-- in ways that the rest of the country could not help but see and be shamed by. Their nonviolent action revealed that it was really the white segregationists who were violent, lawless, and without humanity.

I am convinced that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was tapped into something holy that cleared his vision so that he could articulate truth in ways the rest of the country needed to hear. He belonged to that rich legacy of prophets. His words still offer us meaningful challenges today. We may ignore them, as kings ignored their prophets years ago, but only at great cost to our unity and our goodness as a country.

Dr. King reminded us that we are all, as the Psalmist wrote, “Fearfully and wonderfully made.” Our first mandate is to recognize the sacred worth in each person, black, white, golden, tan, brown; rich or poor; queer or straight. Each one made in the image of God. When we see someone like that, like they are temples for God's holiness, it has implications for how we treat them.

But if we stopped there in understanding King's prophecy, we would be amiss.

We also have to see our own complicity in letting injustice happen.

One of the most disturbing things I saw in the attempted coup on the Capitol on January 6 was that several people were waving the Christian flag and carrying signs proclaiming Jesus Christ. I am grappling with the fact that one of my own relatives, a Christian, has also bought into the lies that this group of mostly white, Christian nationalists has been spreading.

Dr. King directly confronted the role Christians played in maintaining a status quo of injustice, segregation, and economic exploitation. Over the weekend I took some time to re-read Dr. King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. Listen to the painful truths he shares: "In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: 'Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern.' And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular."

In addition to calling out, Dr. King called in. He articulated a vision so beautiful that it awakened the goodness God set in each one of us. Instead of giving up on his country and the people in it, and dwelling in the valley of despair, he gave an invitation, to see with him the world as God sees it. When firehoses got turned on him and the other non-violent protesters, he saw baptismal waters and repeated the refrain from the prophet Amos, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream." He brought people to the mountaintop, to see a vision of the Promised Land on the other side, and see with him the perfect goodness of that beloved community God calls us to take part in.

Like many prophets, and like our redeemer Jesus Christ, Dr. King's vision was enough of a threat that it got him killed. But the vision didn't die with him. Today, as we squint our eyes in the haze of these dimly lit times, the same voice that called in the night, "Samuel, Samuel!" now calls to us. The church's task is to help the people see. God has given us the vision. It is repeated in our scriptures, through the prophets, in Jesus, and in each of our fearfully and wonderfully made bodies. If we do not take that opportunity to share it, someone else surely will; but it may not be the story God means to be told. A voice calls out to you. How will you answer it?

To open our eyes to God's vision, I want to share with you a couple of minutes of archival footage from the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Look for the belovedness there, and let that shape your vision for what God's light might next bring to us.