

The Complications of Listening

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on January 17, 2021

Friendship Presbyterian Church

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore, Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." (1 Samuel 3:1-10, NRSV)

As most of you know, Montgomery, Alabama is my hometown. I spent the first 17 years of my life there. Some of my fondest summer memories as a teenager – and then as a college student home for summer break – are of meeting my Dad for lunch one or two days a week near his office. As far back as I can remember, he worked downtown. Our favorite place was Chris' Hot Dogs on Dexter Avenue, being locally renowned for a special sauce and slaw they put on their dogs – and it's to *die* for. Until COVID struck, I had been thinking about a day trip just to have lunch there again!

As you stand outside Chris', you can look down Dexter and see the Alabama State Capitol four blocks away, directly in front of you – seat of the state government, and one of the key birthplaces of the Confederacy nearly 160 years ago. Near the Capitol stands other buildings too. You can see the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, and near it, the Civil Rights Memorial ... attesting to events before I was born ... events which would go a long way towards defining us as a people ... what kind of nation we would choose to become. And after many decades, those days of choosing are far from over.

But there were victories. If you walk two blocks down Dexter in the other direction, you can see a historical plaque entitled "The Bus Stop", marking where history turned because one bold woman named Rosa Parks was "tired of giving in." She and Dr. King and many others created what Bobby Kennedy would later call a "ripple of hope" ... a ripple which would join with other

ripples and, in time, grow into a current to “sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

This weekend is the Martin Luther King holiday, providing us all an opportunity to take a moment and meditate on the Dream and its unfinished work, especially in the context of our own troubled times. Dr. King was assassinated just a few months before I was born, but his vision of a nation, a world, committed to non-violence, in which the rich diversity of humankind lives together in peace, has lived on, inspiring us still today to do the hard work of listening for the God of Love – and of *Justice*, which is what Love looks like in public.

But listening for the voice of the Holy One is not something to be taken for granted. In fact, such listening is a *choice* – and oftentimes, a risky choice. But as the people of God, it is a choice we are called to make over and over again. It’s easier *not* to listen, because *real* listening carries with it complications. Real listening is dangerous. It would turn out that way for the boy Samuel. He grew up in “the church,” helping Eli with chores around the Temple. Young Samuel never thought about listening for God, because *no one* was listening for God. The text tells us that “The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”

It’s not surprising that when twelve-year-old Samuel hears a voice while sleeping in the Temple—he was neither the first nor the last to sleep in church! —he assumes that it’s Eli. Three times someone calling his name awakens him. Three times he goes to Eli and asks what he wants. After the third time, Eli wonders – though God hasn’t been heard from for some time – if perhaps Samuel is hearing God’s voice. He tells Samuel that if he hears the voice again, he should answer, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

In the verses immediately following Samuel’s response to God’s final call, God speaks and gives Samuel disturbing news—news that Samuel doesn’t even want to repeat to Eli. After he hears God’s voice, Samuel’s life is never the same. His life has just become *harder—much* harder!

Martin Luther King, Jr.’s father, grandfather, great-grandfather, brother, and uncle were all preachers. When *he* became the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, however, he still hadn’t had a firsthand experience of God. But then, Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus and Martin found himself in the middle of a boycott. Although he had only been in Montgomery a year and he was only twenty-seven years old, he quickly became a leader of a movement. It wasn’t long before his family started getting threatening phone calls. He wondered if he could take it. He wanted out.

Then one night, around midnight, another threatening call came: “We’re tired of you, and if you aren’t out of this town in three days, we’re going to blow your brains out and blow up your house.” And so, Dr. King prayed aloud that night. Later, he would tell of hearing a voice that night calling him to stand up for righteousness, justice, and truth; the voice of Jesus promising to be with him through the fight. Dr. King’s life from that moment on is a testimony to the choice he made, no matter the cost.

It has become clear that we are living in times in which we are being called anew to listen for the voice of God, and with stakes that are every bit as high. And as in King's day, listening aright is an exercise in discernment. For there are those who even now gather in Washington and around state houses across our country, not with the intent of peaceful protest as is every American's right, but of disrupting a lawful, Constitutional transfer of power with armed intimidation and threats of violence, incited by falsehoods and conspiracy theories, and abetted by cynical, reckless words. These insurgents carry guns in one hand and crosses in the other and wrap themselves up in the flag. And they speak of defending freedom and standing up for God and taking back America.

But for all their rhetoric of righteousness, their threats and intentions are not of God. Let me be clear: In no way whatsoever do these represent the path of Jesus and his way of compassion, truth, and love. They are false prophets. They are deceivers and are themselves deceived ... their path, one that leads only to fear, destruction, and death.

The scripture tells us to test the spirits whether they are of God (1 John 4:1). To listen then for the voice of the Holy Spirit is to resist deceptive catchphrases and loose talk, and instead to listen for the voice of Love and watch for the fruit it alone can bear. Voices of fear and malice and revenge are in abundance right now, even claiming the mantle of divine approval, but their fruit show that to be a lie.

As the Apostle Paul teaches us in Galatians (5:22-23), when it is the Spirit of God speaking and at work, the fruits in human life are very different than what we see on display now. No, instead we see the fruits of Love and Joy, Peace and Patience, Kindness and Generosity, Faithfulness and Gentleness, and Self-control. We see a drive to serve, rather than a drive to dominate. We see a letting go of selfish ambition and conceit. We see a passion for God's Dream ... for a world healed and restored.

But to discern this Holy voice and then to say, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening," takes courage, for fear is a powerful thing, and the forces that are afoot now know how to manipulate it. Fear so easily corrupts even the purest of intentions, leading to hatred of those who are feared, and so hatred begets hatred, cruelty begets cruelty, violence begets violence. Even in the name of true righteousness and justice, we can *become* the very things we resist. As Howard Thurman wisely put it, "As a Christian, I must see to it that what I condemn in society, I do not permit to grow and flower in me."

This is why Jesus told us to *love* our enemies and to *pray* for them. If we are to follow Jesus faithfully, this is not optional. But this stance is not passivity or weakness. In fact, it is the essential first and ongoing step in *resisting* them – and they *must* be resisted. We are *way* past "Why can't we all just get along?" as the church's message to a weary nation in this historical moment. Silence or acquiescence are no longer options, as if they ever were. No, the time is now for us to appeal to all followers of Jesus, and to all of good will, no matter their political affiliation or party preference, and call on them to take this stand of conscience against the violent who would bear us away into the chaos of civil war.

Together, we must do this if that Dream of God is to come closer to us, for as Dr. King wrote in his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail":

More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men [and women] willing to be coworkers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

The way ahead, no doubt, is long and hard. But this Dream of God, furthered in faithful action and ceaseless prayer, is that that future in which "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream" *will*, one day, be true for all of God's children. This was the Dream that gave Dr. King his courage, and it is the Dream which calls to us today. May our response ever be that of the young Samuel: "Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening."

To the glory of God. Amen.