

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Palisades Presbyterian Church  
January 15, 2006

Scripture Reading: 1 Samuel 3: 1-20  
Gospel Reading: John 1: 43-51

Hymns:  
462 Christ Whose Glory Fills the Skies  
437 Our Cities Cry to You, O Lord  
538 Lord, Dismiss Us with Thy Blessing

---

In the Absence of Time  
©2006 Ray Bagnuolo

There are times, I think, when some would suggest that those who critique scripture for its accuracy do so because they would rather write a sermon about what they want to say rather than about the text and its “real” content.

In technical terms, the first is called isegesis – the writing about or interpretation of scripture from a more personal point-of-view. The later would be more of an exegetical approach, interpreting Scripture from a more factual perception, based on the text, its authors, time in which it was written socio-economic conditions, and so forth.

For me, it has always been the combination of the two: exegesis and isegesis. And, as time goes by, I am more convinced that this is the right approach for me; welcoming to the idea and aware of the fact that the God who revealed herself to the early writers, continues the process of revelation today, in our world, in many ways. It is, therefore, necessary to continue to listen for and to God. So, putting it all together, more or less, I am a believer in the isegetical approach, informed by careful exegesis, and continuing to be open to God’s influence in our present day.

That’s a mouthful. In truth, as I look back on it, it’s one of the reasons I went to seminary: to explore this whole idea of whether there were defensible and true reasons for an interpretive meaning to the scriptures. More than an intellectual endeavor, upon my studies hinged whether I, as a gay person, would be able to have any involvement in an institutional organized religion, which by some practices used its power and tradition to further marginalize oppressed groups. Being one of those groups, I knew its sting.

My conflict? Simply, the Jesus I knew in my heart would never do such things as marginalize or dehumanize any of God's creation, yet many religious leaders were keen on the idea of exclusivity within highly defined and immutable boundaries. Who was right? These leaders or me and the Jesus I knew in my heart?

Honestly, while there were people around with whom I agreed and found my own form of ecclesia, I was unsure just how widespread our perceptions and beliefs were. Had I somehow stumbled into a small radical sect – or was there a broader basis for what we held as true and worth the struggle? I really didn't know that the controversy had been around for a long time. I didn't really know if I would find a comfortable "Scriptural space" for me as a gay man, or if my friends and I were really going too far in our positions as they related to the church. It was a doubt of a strange but important sort.

I am happy to say that I discovered I was in good, sane, and, at the same time, biblically-based company. As I prepared this morning's comments, I had to smile when I read the first few lines of the Interpreters Bible, written in 1953, reminding me that I was joined with a long tradition of those who would speak the truth about texts:

The Hebrew text of Samuel shares with that of Ezekiel the doubtful honor of being the most corrupt in the Old or First Testament. The translators of the KJV, working on this text without the advantages of modern textual criticism, did an heroic best with one unintelligible passage after another.

And a little further on:

The stories in Samuel are among the best known in the Old or First Testament, but nobody can read the book carefully without becoming aware that it contains several glaring inconsistencies. We are told, for example, that

- The word of Samuel came to all of Israel, yet Saul does not appear to have heard him.
- Samuel inflicts a miraculous and final defeat on the Philistines, but the Philistine oppression continues unabated.
- Saul is twice deposed from the throne, but continues to reign without question until his death.
- David becomes Saul's court musician and armor bearer, but in the following chapter neither Saul nor Abner has any knowledge of him.

- Both David and Elhanan are said to have killed Goliath,
- Saul is said to have committed suicide, but was also killed by an Amalekite,
- Absalom is unaware that he has a family, and yet apparently he has four children.
- And so on...

Now, none of this is intended to mean that the stories are totally fictitious or contrived. It does mean, at least to me, that we need to think about what we are reading and also about what we are hearing from ourselves and others in their journey and process with Scriptures, because that is exactly what the Scriptures are: a combination of sources and journeys presented in a way that made sense for – and in some ways sense of -- the times.

The Interpreter's Bible is very direct in this commentary. This source points out that Samuel's revelation was said to have been made in the form of a word but to have been apprehended as a vision. The same language is used elsewhere with later prophets, "...providing a warning to readers, if needed, that the language of religious [or spiritual experiences] in the Bible should not be taken literally, and it was never so intended by those who used it."

So what of Samuel's call? What of the voice in the night that moved into a vision? Certainly something happened, for Samuel was an important prophet of the times. The vision of God, which was rare then as now, did touch Samuel.

Yet, what was as important as hearing the call was Samuel's response to it. "Here I Am Lord," using the verse and title of a popular hymn. "What is it you will have me do?"

And this is an example of how the text can be taken in the smallest of ways and reflected upon with an enormous impact – creating questions that turn it all around, suggesting that maybe the call of God is more common than we think, however, it is the response to the "voice as vision" that is the precious rarity.

In John's reading this morning, Philip is called by Jesus and Philip, in turn, calls Nathaniel. They say, "Yes!" And their becoming disciples leads them to action in the story that now begins to unfold as we move liturgically toward the Easter season.

Putting aside the calendar for now, what strikes me about this passage is the "connectivity" of the call. Jesus called Philip, Philip called Nathaniel, and so forth. We continue as we did in ordination and installations last week, what was set into motion long ago.

In thinking about calls, actions, and visions, this weekend brings to mind another prophet – this one of our times -- the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As an adult, I continue to find a depth in this man and his writings that has opened my eyes and my heart to really seeing him as a prophet. I think when I first heard him given this title, I politely acknowledged that I could understand how he might have been known in such a way, yet prophets, well, they were elevated, if you know what I mean, beyond greatness into some spiritual realm that transcended earth and its limits. What can I say, I start out most things with great expectations and as a bit of a romantic.

But then, well, then I started to meet people in my own life who I truly came to see as prophets in their own right. Certain individuals fighting for justice in the name of God in a variety of ways, selflessly giving of themselves – even acknowledging that such a path of truth and transparency can often mean a great deal of sacrifice. And, I have seen first hand some of those who sacrificed much because they refused to yield. I am sure you have seen it, too.

What I saw in these folks, as I had seen in Jesus, were the ideals that drew me in and called me in ways not to “get” what they had, but to move in that direction, because I could see that is was good, right, moral, ethical, just, and what I believed Christian to be. They became beacons, pointers to something greater than they, and they invited me to point with them, Agreeing to join them and others in the practice of such things, I came to know and see the hardships first hand. In the process the wonder of God grew.

I have been reading a book given to me by some friends called When Jesus Came to Harvard by James Cox. In the book, Cox, a Harvard professor, uses the life of Jesus to teach and study ethics and morality, using the life of Jesus as a model. At one point, in referring to those who had dedicated their lives and actions to the teachings of Jesus, in particular Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others, one student blurted out, “Why does nearly everyone we study in this course end up getting crucified, shot, or hanged?” Why so? Why is it that following such teachings is such a terrible threat to certain dominant or fringe groups?

Certainly. Martin Luther King knew he was living and working in such a dangerous space. For me, nothing speaks louder in Dr. King’s writings than his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, written five years before his assassination.

It starts out like this:

My Dear Fellow Clergymen:

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities ‘unwise and untimely.’

Dr. King was being criticized for his assertiveness in fighting for justice. His colleagues and many others wanted him to go more slowly, take it easy, slow down, Martin, we'll get there. Let's just give people time so that it can be done in a little more comfortable way. The thought the demonstrations and some of his other protests were "unseemly and disruptive." To that he said:

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.

And, you may remember what is probably the most gut-wrenching response to why he could wait no longer:

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed. For years I have heard the word, "Wait!" ... This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet like speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your brothers and sisters at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick, and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue-twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous cloud of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking, "Daddy, why do white people treat black people so mean?"

He adds more to this, closing by saying,

There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

Throughout Dr. King's letter and his ministry, he regularly quotes and refers to Scripture. But he does something else, something all great prophets and teachers do, I believe, he finds in the meaning of Scripture and the presence of the times the "connection," the personal experience that brings meaning and commitment to faith; the personal response to conditions that bring alive the teachings of Jesus in a way that transcends and includes the exegetical elements of what history will note, bringing to life what the soul in its ineffable wisdom insists upon.

Yesterday morning, I offered a short workshop at a conference for LGBT youth at Stony Point, organized by Candle of Rockland. My workshop title was "Who Are You?" Its focus was on that which cannot be contained or defined – the Spirit of each of us collectively grouped under the heading of "spirituality."

I began by asking the students, "Who Are You?" They do as they almost always do, begin by giving me their name, gender, ethnic origin, and so forth." And I reply to each, "Yes, but who are you?"

Sooner or later, in great frustration, one of them will say, "Well, I don't know who I am, do you know who you are?!" And my answer is, "Yes." Eventually, I tell them that who I am is demonstrated by the things that I do based on what I believe in. That "who I am" is pointed to by the decisions I make when there really are no rules or guidelines to follow, for whatever reasons. "Who I am" is shown by the actions I take after those decisions have been made.

As Christians, followers of Jesus, believers in his practices, or however you may define your relationship with God and this radical first century rabbi – as those people, we hold certain beliefs in common. Those beliefs embody the risk of being who we are called to be as Christians. The practice of one's faith is full of risk and, for some, considerable danger. What the writings of the First or Old Testament did to encourage faithfulness was, what we call in today's educational terms "negative reinforcement" – punishment. Negative reinforcement frequently stops certain behaviors but rarely changes or transforms the people involved.

The gospel, however, is transformative.

In the Good News of the Gospel, we have a new kind of message with promise and hope for an eternal union with God. More than a reward, it is a call home following our work here. The promise is not here. The work is here. The promise is elsewhere.

That's what the writers of past and later Scriptures knew. Those were their goals, in some ways to bring the Scriptures and presence of God alive in to make a difference in their worlds.

And, this is who we are. We are the people who are energized, committed, and dedicated to justice, inclusion, and fairness – because we have been called to this -- and we have answered that call.

As we move into the upcoming months, we will begin our mission study for this congregation, once again. Bill Menke has agreed to chair the committee and has posted a copy of our last mission study online.

All this in preparation for the time when this congregation will call its next permanent pastor.

Rather than looking at this as “No, not again!” this is really a wonderful opportunity to enter into the sacred process of inviting leadership to carry on the mission of this congregation, just as God called upon Samuel, Jesus upon Philip, or Dr. King upon his colleagues – it's a call to action and participation in the mission we have been given by God and understand through Scriptures, congregation, community, and our own personal lives.

It's a vision that continues without time or any constraints, and it's ours to care for and watch over, just as Samuel did the ark.

It's a timeless call with enormous impact. I have no doubt you all will do very well in meeting the challenge with prayer and one another.

Amen.