

January 18, 2009

The Second Sunday After the Epiphany, Year B

I Samuel 3:1-10

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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I was confirmed in the Episcopal Church, at the ripe old age of eleven and a half, on May 10, 1966. I stood before the gathered community as I made an adult commitment to fulfill the promises and commitments my parents and Godparents had made on my behalf some ten years earlier. I knelt before the bishop and he laid his hands on me. When I rose, I knew that two things were in store for me. The first was attending the 8:00 a.m. celebration of the Holy *Communion* the next Sunday as a class where we would all receive the bread and wine for the first time. The thing I really looked forward to was becoming an acolyte the next fall and serving at the altar.

The church of that morning was very different than the church today. Girls were not allowed to be acolytes. Many women still covered their heads with linen cloths as they entered the church. It was four years before women were seated for the first time as delegates at our General Convention, and a decade before the first women would be ordained. At the time I was not aware, nor did I really care about, all these things. Remember, I wasn't twelve yet. But I really did want to be an acolyte.

I loved serving at the altar. At that time most altars were still against the wall of the sanctuary and the priest consecrated the bread and wine with *his* back to the congregation. I loved being able to watch the "special stuff" and do special things like light and extinguish the candles, receive the offering plates and give them to the priest, and finally to carry the processional cross and help set the table.

That seems to be exactly what the young Samuel was doing in the lesson today, serving as an "acolyte" under Eli, high priest at the central sanctuary of Shiloh, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, and a judge of Israel. Samuel's mother, Hannah, who had been barren for many years, had given her son to the service of the Lord in thanksgiving for God's gift of a child. Jewish tradition holds that he was just a child of twelve years of age. His job appears to be an important one, keeping the lamp of God, which stood beside the Ark of the Covenant burning through the night. And then, just before morning light, the Lord called, "Samuel, Samuel!" Three times God calls and three times Samuel goes to Eli before the elder priest realizes what is happening. "Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy." Eli gives the key to his future to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

Speak, for your servant is listening.

God tells Samuel that a new day is coming, that the status quo is about to be overturned, that Israel and her people had lost their way yet again, and were wandering further and

further away from the Lord. God is about to do a new thing and what was will be no more. And so a transition begins, the old is passing away and the new is on the horizon.

Let's go back to 1966. For a long, hard time people of many races had been on the front lines of the Civil Rights movement and the tensions were increasing. I believe that it was that summer when I got off a train in south Georgia to spend time with my grandmother that I remember seeing one of those hideous bathroom signs separating people of color from "privileged" people like me.

When I entered Northside High School as an eighth grader in the fall of 1967, one could count the number of African-American students on less than two hands. The old order was still in place, but it was crumbling, bit by bit and piece by piece, but oh so slowly.

I remember hearing Dr. King's mountain top speech in 1968 and feeling the power of his words in my young heart, and somehow, at some deep level, understanding those words. When I heard the news of his assassination, I remember being deeply grieved, as if a vision of hope had been blotted out. My cousin had gone to school with Dr. King's children, and I was just getting to know Juandalyn Abernathy, who sat next to me for most of the school year in chorus. It was the first time I experienced grief on a level that included an awareness that things had radically shifted in some way, something very important had been lost, and the future would not be the same. Dr. King was a servant of the Lord who responded to God's call with, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening," and lived a life that serves as an example for all faithful people to this day.

Forty years have passed. In some ways the world is very much the same, and the journey continues. Many, many people have borne the cost of the journey. Barriers have come down, some only to be erected again. Doors have been unlocked, but not always opened fully. Gains have been made only to be taken away, yet again. But the journey towards the beloved community continues.

God continues to call to God's people. Do we have the ability, the desire, to hear God speak and be led by God, as have so many others who have gone before us? God is ALWAYS ready to do a new thing when the circumstances call for it. And God has many, many ways of acting within the context of human history. The Lord spoke to Samuel and eventually led Samuel to anoint David as King of Israel. God had called out to Moses, Moses answered, and the People of Israel were lead out of bondage in Egypt and into the Promised Land. When the People of Israel again strayed from the way of the Lord, God moved in the midst of human history and lead the people of Israel into and out of Exile in Babylon. In the fullness of time, God became like us and lived among us for a time, to teach us and show us the ways to justice, freedom and peace. And God abides with us now, calls to us now.

Tomorrow we remember a servant of the Lord who listened, and then who spoke out boldly, calling for justice, freedom and equality for all God's people. Tuesday we will witness history as it unfolds in a way that many cannot believe is happening in their lifetime, myself included. Whether you are a Libertarian, Democrat or a Republican, liberal or conservative, no matter how you voted, no matter what personal beliefs you

hold, we are about to witness, yet again, a moment in history not to be forgotten. We are "One nation, under God." As one nation, full of diversity and opinions, but one nation, under God, we will again be blessed by the orderly transition from one presidency to another, and on this occasion from one generation to another, and, I hope, from one era to another.

I am an old hippie. That is a bit of an exaggeration, but not too much of one. Even as recently as the early 1990's I displayed a bumper sticker on my truck that read "Subvert The Dominant Paradigm." The paradigm is shifting. God is in the midst of the shift. It may be a little scary to some, unbelievable to others, and cause for celebration for many, but the shift is happening.

In the mist of change and transition, we should not forget who is really in charge. We need to remember that God is always about a new thing, always about a new creation, always about being our God when we seek to be God's people. As a hymn of the church begins, "God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year."

God comes and calls our name, calls us to be quiet, to listen.

Can we hear the Lord calling us?

Will we say, "Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening."

Then will we act boldly to work for justice, freedom and peace for all God's children?

We can, we must, we will, with God's help.

Amen.