

Eric Dupee

January 17, 2021

Year B, 1 Samuel 3:1-18

“Help Wanted”

This morning, I think there’s an interesting connection between the call of Samuel and the observance of the Martin Luther King holiday. That call takes place during the night. It’s very sweet and a little humorous. But I want to draw your attention to the next morning. It’s what takes place in the morning that provides a glimpse into what God was doing at that time in Israel’s history.

Twice, one night, Samuel thought he heard the voice of the aging high priest Eli and went to him, but was sent back to bed. The third time this happened Eli understood that it was God calling to Samuel and told the boy to answer: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

When Samuel did this, God told him that Eli and his house would suffer for the misdeeds of his two sons. Eli’s two sons were corrupt priests. They took advantage of those who came to the shrine at Shiloh to make sacrifices. They cavalierly had their way with women. God spoke to Samuel informing him, “I am about to punish the house of Eli forever and there is nothing they can do to get back into my good graces.”

Why did God say this to Samuel? God needed someone to deliver the news. There were indications this was coming. The house of Eli was in decline. The word of the Lord was rare in those days. God was bringing an end to Eli’s corrupt regime and ushering in a new chapter in Israel’s history. Apparently, a harsh message of judgement was necessary in order to close the book and usher in a hopeful new beginning.

Have you ever had to be the bearer of a difficult truth? Have you ever been afraid to say something, because you didn’t know how the other person would react? I think it’s safe to say, Martin Luther King knew that feeling. If you know that feeling, then you know how Samuel felt the next morning. Remember, he was young. Eli was his mentor. Eli was the high priest of the most important religious center of the time. In the morning, Eli called to Samuel and asked, “What was it that God told you? Do not hide it from me?”

I love this story, because it shows God partnering with Samuel to bring an end to a terrible situation in order that something new and better could emerge. It was difficult

and scary for Samuel to make the proclamation that officially ended Eli's reign, but it has been said that in every ending, there's a new beginning.

Martin Luther King was a young man when he entered the fray of the Civil Rights Movement. Talk about doing scary things, speaking the truth to power, and putting one's body on the line. King and countless others did the hard work of disrupting oppressive systems in order to bring about something better.

I think the courage and willingness of Samuel to respond to God's call, to do something scary, to risk, and the observance of MLK's legacy, provide an opportunity to think about our response to the suffering in the world. Is it enough to see people's struggles on TV and hope things will someday change or do we take a step towards causing that change? Can each of us, have a role in disrupting destructive patterns in order that something new can emerge?

I have a friend who is the pastor at the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington DC. As the name implies, it's a predominantly black church. In fact, it was one of the churches vandalized by white supremacists in December. The church's Black Lives Matter banner was destroyed during a violent demonstration.

The Reverend William H. Lamar IV has been in the news. He was interviewed on NPR. Recently, he wrote an article in which he reflected on his experience. He began the article by describing the piles of supportive cards, letters, and checks, he and the church have received.

After stressing his sincere gratitude and appreciation for every gesture of kindness, he said this. "At the same time, I have grown weary of the impulse to quiet deep spiritual stirrings by acting sentimentally." I'll say that again. He wrote, "I have grown weary of the impulse to quiet [or negate] deep spiritual yearnings by acting sentimentally.

In other words, does the Spirit stir within us and move us simply to offer comforting gestures? Is it enough to send a card? Do we limit our response to the urging of the Holy Spirit with kind words or do go farther? Do we engage in the hard work of determining why people suffer and how we can end that suffering?

Rev Lamar wrote, "The mystical energy roiling inside us demands a response. Some of us must admit that no matter how deep the awakening we experience or how vast the

pain of others, we will not commit to anything but the nice response, the easy response, the feel-good response.”

I have to admit, I felt convicted when I read that. Rev Lamar and I are part of a group of clergy friends. When we saw what happened to his church on the news, some of us sent texts. “We love you, Bill. You’re in our thoughts. We’re praying for you and your congregation.”

It would be so easy to leave it there. It was a quick and painless response. It was sincere. It wasn’t a bad thing to do. But is that what the “spiritual stirring” in me was all about? Is that the extent of the engagement God expects of me? I don’t think so. I think, like Samuel, I need to open myself to doing some difficult work. I don’t feel like I have the right to be safe and comfortable all the time.

Last summer, a family in the church I was serving organized a Black Lives Matter march. They asked me to say a prayer at the march. I’ll admit that my first response was discomfort. I’m white. As such, I was a little nervous about being front and center at the Black Lives Matter rally. But I love that family. I know something of their experience as persons of color and I’d do anything they ask of me. I can report that discomfort stayed with me as I was standing before 1,000 strangers with a microphone in my hand, but I’m glad I did it.

One thing I’ve resolved to do is educate myself. Someone recommended a book to me titled *White Rage* by Carol Anderson. It provides insight into how white people and people of color experience life in America differently. As uncomfortable as it might be to learn, I believe it is God’s desire for me. I’m going to send out an invitation for you to read it also and to join me to discuss it.

But that’s me. Your journey might look very different than mine. I’m wondering what God is calling you to do. When you feel moved, when your “spirit is stirred” by the events of the world, will you make the easy and safe response? Or can you go a little farther? Can you allow yourself to engage more deeply?

I’ll tell you. There’s nothing that gives me more hope for humanity than to see someone put themselves out there in an effort to ease someone else’s suffering. I’m glad the call of Samuel didn’t end with what happened in the night. In the morning, he did the difficult thing.

I'm glad Martin Luther King didn't limit his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement to preaching and praying. He didn't just hope for equality. He marched for it and went to jail for it.

I'm glad Jesus didn't stop at offering comforting words. When he encountered hungry people, he didn't simply say, "You're in my thoughts and prayers." He fed them. He didn't simply offer encouraging words to the poor and vulnerable. He opposed the systems and traditions that took advantage of them. He sacrificed himself on their behalf.

In his article, Rev. Lamar wrote, "We are being called to disrupt this world and to co-labor with God as God inaugurates the new heaven and the new earth." Samuel was a co-laborer. Jesus co-labored with God like no one else. So, many people who have come before us have had a role in bringing about that new heaven and new earth.

Now, it's our turn.