

2 Epiphany

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After We Keep the Faith

In 1959 the American Baptist Convention asked Martin Luther King to write a little paragraph about his call to ministry as part of their Life Service Sunday observance. Dr. King wrote back:

*My call to the ministry was neither dramatic nor spectacular. It came neither by some miraculous vision nor by some blinding light experience on the road of life. Moreover, it did not come as a sudden realization. Rather, it was a response to an inner urge that gradually came upon me.*¹

Before King was ordained at the age of 19, he had considered a career in medicine, then in law. But a desire to serve God and humanity accompanied his studies and ultimately prompted him to choose ministry.

He was following in the footsteps of his father, and his maternal grandfather and great-grandfather, who was a preacher and was also enslaved. The ministers in his mother's family formed Ebenezer Baptist Church.

In many ways, Martin Luther King Jr. was just keeping the faith, doing what he was doing, when the call came to him. And it was a calling with consequences. By the age of 25 he would become spokesman and leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. A year later he would experience his first arrest and the bombing of his home. And he would become a force for the civil rights of black and brown people and an unsettling voice for peace during the Vietnam War until his assassination in 1968.

When I set Dr. King's story of a rather unremarkable beginning alongside the readings for today, a Sunday whose Scriptures are always about the call to discipleship, I see some important parallels with the biblical figures whom we encounter. And I see some important lessons for us as we struggle with what we are called to do and be at this morally demanding time.

Let's consider Samuel, who awakens to God calling him by name, while he sleeps in the Temple of the Lord at Shiloh where the Arc of the covenant lies. He is a boy who has been doing this since he was a toddler, brought to this place by his mother Hannah in thanksgiving for his birth. For years, he had been doing what he was doing, obediently, faithfully serving the temple. And then the call of God came to him, and he didn't even recognize the voice without help. So he turns to his master, Eli, an old, blind priest whose own sons were so corrupt that God was about to destroy the family's priestly legacy. And Eli, who had grown so accustomed to the silence of God, did not recognize who was calling Samuel at first. Until he did.

If this happens to you again, Eli says to Samuel, say "speak Lord for your servant is listening."

And Samuel does. And God Speaks. It is a call with consequences: Samuel must first deliver bad news for his masters, the corrupt priests of God, and be the first prophet to usher in the bloody era of Israel's first kings.

¹ My Call to Ministry by Martin Luther King Jr can be found here -- <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/my-call-ministry>

He was just doing what he was doing. He was just keeping the faith. Until God decided to do something new through him.

Now let's look at Nathaniel in today's Gospel from John. Jesus is in the process of choosing his followers. Jesus had already signed up Andrew and Peter and Philip – all from the same town. And Philip sought his friend Nathaniel to let him know that they had found the messiah, whom Moses and the prophets wrote about – Jesus of Nazareth. What good can come out of Nazareth? says Nathaniel, for any student of the law would know that's too insignificant a birthplace for the messiah. Come and see, says Philip.

And Nathaniel does. And Jesus speaks: "Ah, an Israelite who speaks the truth." How does Jesus know him? "I saw you under the fig tree." And that's enough for Nathaniel to at least proclaim that Jesus must be king of Israel. It's even better than that, Jesus assures him.

Time to stop for a brief lesson in biblical criticism. Scholars say that Nathaniel here may be a collective figure, representing the faithful of Israel who because of their open heartedness recognize Jesus easily as the one promised in the Torah. Being under the fig tree refers to faithful reading of Torah, righteous tending to the law.²

So for our purposes here is Nathaniel, just doing what he is doing, just keeping the faith. Until God decides to do something new through him. It's a call with consequences – the followers of Jesus will witness Word, and repair, and a covenant relationship that they have longed for from the beginning. And they will know torture and death at the hands of rulers afraid of losing their power.

Samuel, Nathaniel and Martin. Just doing what they're doing. Just keeping the faith. Until God decides to do something new through them. A calling with consequences.

That's the pattern. And it feels a bit like now to me. How long have we been tending the holy fire, sleeping at the feet of a silent God, so that it's hard to recognize the voice when it finally speaks? How long have we been sitting under our own vine and fig tree, peacefully attending Sunday worship and bible study? How long do the generations go back – parents and grandparents who passed the faith along? That might not be your story individually. But it describes the church pretty well.

And now it's facing a call with consequences. And so are we who are its members. There are consequences to calling for peace in the Holy Land right now, when so many want retribution. There are consequences for speaking up for the environment, for denouncing racism, for defending the rights of women, for standing up for the identities of LGBTQIA+ people. There are consequences for working for a just world as this election cycle heats up.

And we can hear it loud and clear if we've been doing what we've been doing with love and openheartedness. That's the point at which Samuel and Nathaniel and Martin hear the call to what comes next.

It's important to remember that they do not make the crossing to prophet and martyr alone. If you hear that voice again, say "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening," old Eli advises.. And we are all reminded that tuning in the voice of God requires a quieting of the outside world and an expectant waiting for things to become clear. And it requires us to address God directly: Speak Lord.

² Muddiman, John; Barton, John. The Gospels (Oxford Bible Commentary) (p 192 OUP Oxford, Kindle Edition

“What good can come out of Nazareth? Come and see!” Philip says to a reluctant Nathaniel. And we are all reminded that in addition to listening there is seeking, which needs to happen up close, in the interplay of relationships. It’s a bit risky, walking toward God so that you can get a better look at what’s in store. You might not be sure until you’ve been in the fray awhile.

That was the case for Dr King. In a sermon called “Antidotes for Fear” he tells the story of Mother Pollard, “one of the most dedicated participants in the bus protest in Montgomery”, who after walking for several weeks with the movement was asked if she was tired. She replied “My feet is tired but my soul is rested.”³

King writes that one Monday he was speaking at a mass meeting, after a week in which he’d been arrested and had received numerous threatening phone calls. He said that Mother Pollard came up to him afterward and said “Come here son... Something is wrong with you,” she said. “You didn’t talk strong tonight.”

King writes: “Seeking to further disguise my fears, I retorted, Oh no Mother Pollard nothing is wrong. I am feeling as fine as ever.” But her insight was discerning. “Now you can’t fool me” she said “I knows something is wrong. Is it that we aint’ doing things to please you? Or is it that the white folks is bothering you?” Before I could respond she looked directly in my eyes and said “ I don told you we is with you all the way.” Then her face became radiant and she said in words of quiet certainty “But even if we ain’t with you, God’s gonna take care of you.” As she spoke these consoling words, everything in me quivered and quickened with the pulsing tremor of raw energy,” King wrote.

As church, facing a call to love and Justice with consequences at a time when threats are real, people are dying, our democracy hangs in the balance, and something new might just be possible, we have to be there for one another as we keep the faith.

We need to say: If you hear that voice again you say “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.

We need to hold out a hand and say “Come and See.”

And we need to remind one another “we are with you all the way”

And even if we ain’t with you all the way, God’s gonna take care of you.”

That’s our call to God.

Amen.

³ "The Mastery of Fear or Antidotes for Fear" <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/draft-chapter-xiv-mastery-fear-or-antidotes-fear>