

JESUS AND THE GIANT TRIPLETS

Texts on Sunday, January 15, 2012

1 Samuel 3: 1-20; Matthew 5: 1-16

In the story we heard today from the Hebrew scriptures, Eli the priest is not the hero. Samuel is. At one level, the story's message belongs to a genre beloved around the world, wherein a youth is able to discern the truth which age and experience cannot see or hear. By means of such stories, the keepers of tradition remind themselves that they are passing on—that our ways are not always. But this story has a twist to send us into a channel deeper than the ordinary legend of its kind. Here we are told that “the word of the LORD was rare in those days.” As the story opens, the priest is no longer able to see. Both he and young Samuel are trying to sleep.

Blindness and sleep are figures for ignorance and denial in all the people. A group who cannot face their crisis is sleeping; most of its members are blind. The word of the LORD is rare—not because the Eternal ever ceases from communicating, but because so few are awake and able to discern the word. Now, when Samuel awakes, it is a figure for a whole people preparing to wake from their indifference to action. It can happen in a whole nation. What is the Arab Spring if not whole peoples preparing to wake? It can happen in a church, as the people grow restless with their old ways and evil habits and yearn for transforming meaning and effective action.

Of course, waking comes to individuals, too. Yet on this day of honor for our prophet Martin Luther King, it is well that we remember that no individual, no matter how skilled or gifted, ever simply leads a people out of the valley of the shadow of sleep. No, the rising of a people is a work far more complex. It resists all science and prediction. But this much is sure. The greatness of a leader hangs on the people's awareness of the severity of their crisis. If most of the people are sleeping, no matter how their heedless practices oppress, there exists no severity in which great skill and wisdom can find expression. But sometimes, something changes in a people. A critical mass of energy arises in the consciousness of enough of them, and they turn in their beds and rise and stand. You know this is how it happened with Martin Luther King. We know from his own words that, fresh from doctoral studies at Boston University, installed in his Montgomery, Alabama pulpit, he anticipated nothing of the public life that unfolded through him. The waking began when the bus riders had awakened and begun their boycott, when they asked him—how shall we put it?—asked him to become great for them.

We receive more from Samuel's story when we read it for the pattern of a people arising from their sleep, rather than as a simple hero tale. In that vein, it can enrich us with still more ore. For when Samuel awakes in the night, he does not know the sound. This is like Martin King's surprise at his attraction to the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi during his academic study. He knew that Gandhi's teaching of *satyagraha*—the force of truth and love—transcended the debates between liberal and neo-orthodox theologies. But he had no sense for how to apply the word coming to him, or the truth he felt there. It was like a word in the night which he could not understand. As the story has it, the young prophet did not yet know the LORD. Only the blind priest could help Samuel. This too is a figure. It can mean that

only the perennial wisdom of a spiritual tradition was able to direct the inchoate sense within the prophet that somehow, he was being called. In 1956, the church called to young Martin, to guide him in discerning in their crisis God's word to him.

There is still more here. When Samuel receives the LORD's word, it is indeed one to wake the nation; one to "make both ears of any who hear it tingle." It is a word of doom for the powers that governed; a fatal curse upon the sons of Eli for abusing the people to enrich themselves and upon the father Eli, for tolerating their molestation of religion and of justice. But Eli, who alone knew how to help Samuel respond to his God, now gives the young leader courage for his new calling, for Samuel would not dare to speak a hard word to his teacher. Blind Eli says, in effect, *I must see this*. "Do not hide it from me," he says. Then Samuel steps into the work of the prophet, the first since Moses of that great tradition who speak truth to power. The startling word here is that blind Eli *wants* to see the truth. This is a figure for how a people wake to the word of a leader. They draw it from their leader when they are ready to listen. In the civil rights struggle of Dr. King's time, some part of this nation woke like Eli, ready to see and to repent from hundreds of years of molested religion and deranged injustice. Some part was ready to listen without defense or offense. This too is part of the mystery of the steps in the dance of great leadership on the stage of history.

No nation on earth now or ever has preserved a literature of confession and self-criticism and repentance like that of ancient Israel's bible. America has, for example, only one significant national record of confession. It is Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address:

If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come; but which, having continued through his appointed time, he now wills to remove; and that he gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came; shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which believers in a living God always ascribe to him?

With the rest of the address, this is America's only national confession of sin for the evil of slavery. And six weeks thereafter, the confessor was assassinated. We do not do confession and repentance here. The American Indian has never yet received as much as Lincoln's word. You will never hear the word during a presidential election season, that is sure. Our national palaver plays only defense or offense. We do not leave the field of combat, for we are rarely awake as one nation. This is one way to understand our polarization.

Not so with ancient Israel. They could have jettisoned all the scrolls of the prophets and told themselves a simpler tale of their victimhood at the hands of evil empires. Sometimes they did just that. But by preserving these scriptures with these prophets, they chose the spirit we meet first here in Eli, to allow the awful word of God's damnation to be spoken; to start again the sober inquiry into self and other; to see the stranger; to see how far from God we have strayed and how far from justice, and how deaf to the voices of people long silenced; and how the two loves, of God and stranger, are intertwined like lovers who must not be separated. For where there is no right worship, there can be no justice, and where no justice, there can be no true worship. Certainly, we are not saying that ancient Israel ever fulfilled

the work that “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” But Israel set the pattern, and Eli, even in his blindness, is therefore a guide to Jews and to Christians alike. “What is it God is telling you, O prophet? Do not hide it from us.”

As many of you know, I was traveling in Jerusalem and the West Bank through most of this last week. I thank you for your many well-wishes for safe travel. Our group comprised some fifteen New York City clergy, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian. We aimed to learn about the conflicts there, rather than to make religious pilgrimage. We interviewed people who care about peace in Israel and Palestine. Some were Palestinians. Some were powerful parliamentarians. We met with clergy from each of the Abrahamic traditions. In those few days, we did not speak with partisans who have gone rigid with hatred for the other, the stranger. But such rigidity holds most of the people of Israel in thrall, according to some Jews we interviewed. Hatred and ignorance of the other, the stranger is what we have called sleep, in the figure of today’s story. As a whole, today’s Israel, whether religious or secular, is no guardian of the spirit of confession and repentance. They are rather more like America, in this respect—thoroughly divided in their sense of identity, hardly able to move as one. Like a body, sleeping. Yet some are awake.

Perhaps Shimon Peres is like Eli for today’s Israel. Nearly ninety years old, he will not serve as Samuel. But this current president and former prime minister of Israel, who spoke with our group for most of an hour, said a radical thing about Israel’s identity. “Peace with the Palestinians is not a matter of political convenience. The Jew was not born to rule over other people. We need peace in order to be true to ourselves, to our faith, to our God.”

We are like that too, both in America, and in our city, and in our church. That is, we need peace in order to be true to ourselves. Through most of history, the tragic pattern in conflict is simply to say, “They started it. They must change.” On we go, confessing nothing, violent with our thoughts and words if not with fists and arms. Can anything be said of how it is that a critical mass within a people awake to their calling and accept that “new occasions teach new duties and makes ancient good uncouth”? Or is the wisdom of waking an ineffable gift of God or fate, in which our own wills have no strength?

When I set the curious title to today’s sermon well before I flew to Israel, I was re-reading Dr. King’s famous April 1967 speech, offered from this chancel. Here he said, “I am convinced that . . . we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a ‘thing-oriented’ society to a ‘person-oriented’ society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”

A radical revolution of values can’t conquer ‘the giant triplets.’ What else would were such a revolution but “a great awakening”? Again and again, King’s speech affirms that “we must, we must” change—but he offers no thoughts on how such an awakening can come to a people. Only that it must, or doom is sure. Near the end of his speech, King asserts that “there is nothing, except a tragic death wish to prevent

us from re-ordering our priorities.” His is like Samuel’s word to Eli—but Eli was doomed. Are we? Can those who are waking accomplish anything on the field of history?

Perhaps something can be said on this subject—about Jesus and the giant triplets. I take it for a spiritual law that there is no awaking without a death. The death I am speaking of is not tragic, but it is not easy, and you cannot set it up. You cannot save yourself. In short, the part of us that wishes to be free is all mixed up with the part that is afraid to change. No action is pure and effective. Therefore, the death we need to set us free needs to be given, a gift.

This is how the beatitudes aim for you. Jesus word aims to catch you in your Eli nature, yet not with a word of doom, but with life where you did not expect it, that is; precisely where you suffer and struggle with your victimhood, or your power to hurt, or your emptiness. Right there, God in Christ sends you a beatitude to invite you to die to yourself. For just a second, to cease the chatter and worry and self-regard, and die, that you may receive life that has no end but God. Now. Then and there, you can see your part in sheltering the giant triplets. Your part in violence, whose monster mode is militarism. Your part in sleeping, unaware of the reality of strangers, whose monster mode is racism. Your part in craving control over things, whose monster mode is extreme materialism. When you are awake like this, ready in full repentance to acknowledge what has been, and to see all creatures great and small as part of God’s beloved community, then in Buber’s word from the book *I and Thou*, then “ . . . the heaven of Thou is spread out over me, and the winds of causality cower at my heels, and the whirlpool of fate stays its course.” You are free, in the power of God. And your work in history stands before you.

Diane Nash was one of the tireless planners and workers in the 1960s civil rights struggle. In an interview with David Garrow, she said, “If people think that [this] was Martin Luther King’s movement, then today they are likely to say, ‘Gosh, I wish we had a Martin Luther King here to lead us’ . . . But if people knew how that movement started, then the question they would ask themselves is, ‘What can I do?’”

May it be that the beautiful song of Martin Luther King’s voice not lull into sleep, wishing for a hero to lead us out of the shadow. Rather, may it be that we ourselves feel in our hearts, minds, and wills the deep reason that Dr. King ended his speech here in 1967, citing Lowell’s poem which we sang at the opening of this day. Here is a stanza which was missing from our hymn:

By the light of burning martyrs, Christ, Thy bleeding feet we track,
Toiling up new Calv’ries ever with the cross that turns not back;
New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth,
They must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth.

May our memorial to our brother and prophet Martin so mind us and make us members of a beloved community that we ask, with Diane Nash, ‘What can I do?’