

## CALLED TO THE STAGE

Texts on Sunday, January 14, 2018

1 Samuel 3: 1-18; Luke 4: 14-21

In the months I have been with you, we have attended closely to symbols and practices at the heart of our tradition. Why do these matter so much? It comes to this: In an emergency, place the mask over your own face before you try to help others. This violent, greed-ruled world is in emergency; whoever would help needs to be strengthened inwardly, armored in faith. Today, we open a series of sermons on prophecy, as it was inscribed by Israel on history. What is a prophet? we ask. Can it be said that it is God who calls a person to the stage of history? And how may they who speak, and they who listen, discern the impulse to speak as not mere psychological stimulation, or egotism, but a movement worthy of the name of God?

In *Stride Toward Freedom*, Dr. King tells how it came about that his first pastorate was in Montgomery, Ala., and how the boycott of city buses by the Black community took hold and prevailed. Just before Christmas of 1955, not two weeks into the boycott, the city's White fathers gathered with Black leaders to have them to end their resistance. A White Methodist minister spoke. King thought this Dr. Frazier a "a tall, distinguished looking man, the quintessence of dignity," and he remembered his smooth words: "The job of the minister is to lead the souls of men to God, not to bring about confusion by getting tangled up in transitory social problems." (p116)

Ah, the unsearchable tragedy of racism, that in the name of Jesus—who opened his ministry with the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, saying, 'The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to the blind, sight, to the oppressed, freedom'—the churches of God have for so long forwarded the blithe assurances of powerful hypocrites, that God does not tangle with the social problems of the day.

Listen! The prophets tangled, and Jesus took their mantle. Why, they even meant thus to lead souls to God, though hardly happily, those with power. The prophet was no Nostradamus; rather, one who warned the powerful that God sees the ruin they are practicing upon the nation's poor and weak; and that God, who sees, will soon ruin the powerful and all they have built, both to punish these mockers of God and man and to draw up from the pit those made destitute by them. That's a prophet's work. Now we must ask, How in God's name can a person with confidence trust that this sound rising from the throat in fury and compassion is worthy of the name of God?

Consider Samuel. Samuel will be the first of the prophets to wield real power for and against the nation. But here, he is a boy, an apprentice in the

temple. In our mind, let us not make the boy too small lest the story be made small. Think him an adolescent, no genius; earnest, obedient, and respectful, yet who does not know the Lord.

These are the first notes in the song of the call to the stage: The prophet comes not sprinkled with magic dust, with no experience of the Divine and not able to perceive the situation. Readers of 1 Samuel already know that Eli's two sons are corrupt and greedy, stealing from the temple and ruining the people. Yet the one whom God will call, though he is apprenticed in the very temple of the Lord, does not yet understand the crisis around him.

These first notes sound like Dr. King's telling how he ventured forth on the plan of his vocation, driving to Montgomery, Ala. with a Donizetti opera playing on the radio. Aged 25, he had just completed 21 years of schooling. The doctoral thesis still lay before him, and he wrote of feeling torn in two directions, as he considered with his wife Coretta offers from colleges in the North to teach, and from churches to preach, like this one in Montgomery. How the couple yearned to escape the South, yet also felt "something of a moral obligation to return—at least for a few years." (p 21) Indeed, the one whom God calls to the stage often does not understand the crisis.

The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. Ditto, our time. The eyesight of the great leader had grown dim, so that he could not see. Ditto, our time. Yet the lamp of God had not yet gone out. Pray may it be, Ditto in our time. And though Samuel lay by the ark of God, his apprenticeship in religion did not help reveal the Lord to him as he heard the call, "Samuel! Samuel!" The young man said, "Here am I!"

Hineini is how the Hebrew sounds. Do you know this beautiful word of faithful obedience to the master? Leonard Cohen, grandson to a great rabbi of Montreal, sang it out in a song prepared in the months before his death. Hineini. Here am I. Ready, my Lord. It is Abraham's word to God and Isaac's at the altar on Moriah. It is Jacob's from the stone pillow. Hineini: the sign of one who can be called on stage. Now Samuel ran to Eli. "Here I am, for you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call." Three times this takes place. Then it is blind Eli who knows, by hearing, that this is the call of God.

In December of 1955, after Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to yield her seat to a White passenger, how swiftly things moved for the Black community. In three days, the Montgomery Improvement Association had formed. A presiding officer must be chosen. As King saw it, many were more prominent and knowledgeable than he. Perhaps they did not wish to risk so much. Let the young man try. If he fails, it will do no great harm. He was now 26 years of age and they asked him to serve. He accepted. "Hineini."

In the night to Samuel, what did God say? God said he would soon ruin Eli and his rule and destroy with terrible violence the two corrupt sons; and then establish a faithful ruler for Israel for a new day. In a word, the prophet received a vision of doom to give to his master. When the morning dawned, "Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli, but Eli called Samuel and said, 'Samuel, my son.' Samuel said, 'Hineini!.' Said the old man, 'Do not hide from me anything of all that the Lord told you.' Samuel told him everything. 'It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him,' said Eli."

The day after King was elected president of the association, he too would be given a vision of doom for the masters of Montgomery, and a word for a new day for those who had long walked in darkness. But the word of the prophet does not come easy. At a large church, a mass meeting formed, and King must go and speak. "I was possessed by fear," he wrote. "Each week, I needed fifteen hours to prepare my sermon." Now he had fifteen minutes for "a speech expected to give direction to a people imbued with a still unplumbed passion for justice." With the press "poised to record my words and send them across the nation . . . I was almost overcome, obsessed by a feeling of inadequacy. With nothing left but faith in a power whose matchless strength stands over against the frailties of human nature, I turned to God in prayer." Can it be God who calls to the stage one so unconfident, so unprepared?

King struggled with the most basic requirement of this speech—that it "arouse the group to action by insisting that their self-respect was at stake, and that if they accepted injustice without protesting, they would betray their own dignity and the eternal edicts of God himself [and yet] balance this with a strong affirmation of the Christian doctrine of love." Ah, but now time was up. He had to get through the crowd, to the stage.

Had we much time, we might thrill to hear those first words from the prophet: doom for the masters of segregation; for the Black people, light. But our question still hangs. How comes the call to the stage, and the confidence to name the caller God? Well can we understand that after the speech rang out, King wrote that he now saw "what the older preachers meant when they said, 'Open your mouth and God will speak for you.'" (p63) Fully can we feel with the prophet why he thought of the whole movement in Montgomery that it could not be explained just in terms of oppression or by the skill of the leaders at hand. No, "Montgomery would have taken place if the leaders had never been born," he wrote. "It cannot be explained without a divine dimension . . . Whatever the name . . . there is a creative force that works to pull down mountains of evil. God still works through history his wonders to perform." (p 62)

Still we ask, Is there any sign in the call to the stage to help us trust that the voice is of God? The Bible has a counsel in this matter. “You may ask yourself, “How can we recognize a word which the Lord has not spoken?” [Answer:] If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not . . . prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken.” (Deut 18:21) Oh dear. How startlingly unhelpful! What if there is not a moment to wait and see if the thing should prove true? What if must decide and commit now?

But there are signs of the sound of the voice of God in the call: In part, it was in their uncertainty. God deliver us from those so certain of God’s will they crush others with ease. In part, it was in the humility of their Hineini. Still more, the sign lay in their passion to live into the paradox of love: loving God, loving oneself, and loving the other. Loving the very one to whom doom must be spoken. False prophets—they surround us now; they have the cameras on them, their voices boom from stages, but—they cannot live and lead into the paradoxes of love: for God, for oneself, for the other. They are on a stage, yes, but it is not God has called them to it, and this we know because it cannot even be imagined that they proclaim with Dr. King from that first December night, “Love must be our regulating ideal.”

Love puts us at a crossroad. It has consequences, for these loves pull in different directions. A body can be stretched and dragged even to death while striving toward freedom to love above and beyond and within. Last Thursday, our brother Ravi Ragbir was taken bodily from the walks of this city, where he has loved and served New York’s immigrants for more than a decade. Was he called to the stage by God? Oh, I know it as I know the sound of Hineini, as I know the sound of bodies beaten by police at the bidding of powers who must constrain the works of love.

“For the Lord your God is Lord of lords, the great, the mighty and the terrible God, who . . . executes justice for the fatherless and the widow and who loves the immigrant, giving them food and clothing. Therefore, love the immigrant, for you were once immigrants in the land of Egypt.” (Deut 10:17)

You are called to the stage now. Is it tomorrow, in the march of the West Side churches praying for immigrants? Is it in Washington Square, where a mass meeting is called to stand with Ravi? Is it in a different passion you feel to live into the paradoxes of love? However God calls, trust that you can hear it, for you have already died and your life is hid with Christ in God.