**How f**

In our text this morning, we read about the passing of the torch from one veteran prophet to his young apprentice. Ever since he was a little boy, Samuel was dedicated by his parents to follow the mentorship of Eli to serve inside the temple. Eli, on the other hand, was becoming of age nearing the end of his ministry. Although Eli’s four sons were also priests but they were not doing what they were supposed to. They had become corrupted and their actions were displeasing to God. Because of their unfaithfulness, they were not chosen to succeed Eli. Eli’s health, on the other hands, had gradually deteriorated and his eyesight became more dimmed. Eli had hope that Samuel would be the one who would eventually take over when his time is up. Eli was more than a spiritual mentor to Samuel, he was like a father to him as well.

During those days, the word of the LORD was few and the visions were rare. Instead of placing their complete faith and trust in their sovereign God, they would rather have a human king, like their neighboring countries, to rule and to lord over them. For many generations, they had not been obedient of their faith and as a result, their relationship with God had gone into a downward spiral.

But despite all of that, God had kept His end of the covenant that was made to Abraham. When the word of the LORD finally came, it was no denial that it seemed foreign and awkward to them. They might hear it, but they didn’t understand. That’s like have you ever received a phone call from someone whom you have not spoken to in a very long time, you don’t even recognize his/her voice on the other side. The conversation became extremely awkward and impersonal. Just the other day, my mom had one of his high school classmates called from overseas. They had not heard from each other for more than 30 some years. According to my mom, it was a very awkward conversation, not sure of what to say…because it has been a very long time. Things are not what it used to be back in the old days.

Sometimes our relationship with God can also be like that. When we are so spiritually distant and do not have a healthy relationship with God, we don’t even know what to say. When God calls, we fail to hear God’s calling or what’s even worse, we deny to hear what God has to say. We think we can function on our own while we trust ourselves more than God or others. We have placed poor judgements and made irrational decisions upon our own knowledge, rather than of God’s wisdom. We’ve failed to consult with God’s ultimate plan and purpose before implementing ours. THAT’s kind of what happened to our human relationship with God back in Eli and Samuel’s time and perhaps even in ours today…when we think we know it all, when in fact we only end up making a fool of ourselves.

Our text this morning reminded us that for the longest time, God’s vision was dimmed and God’s voice was silent to the people. Not because God had abandoned the people, but the people had abandoned God. The people had been stuck in this mode for such a long time and had become an acceptable norm to them. Many of the people, including the leaders had become corrupted. They had lost their motivation and purpose to serve. They were more concerned about their own personal interests and gains rather than the interests of others. They minded their own business rather than engaging in God’s business and mission. Even if God might have spoken to the people through the prophets (like Eli), the people refused to listen because of their own stubborn hearts and rebellious attitudes. There was this tremendous disconnect between God and the people and there seemed to be no-end in sight. Hmmm…does this sound familiar or ring an alarm for us in light of what’s happening in our time and place today?

But God says enough is enough. Something is about to change. These selfish abuses of power and privileges must come to an end. God is about to restore a new order, whether the people like it or not. God’s will shall not be denied, as God is about to do a new thing, to sing a new song, and to breathe a fresh breath of air upon us. The old is gone and the new has come!

But the question is, are the people ready to receive it? There is a price that the people must be willing to accept and pay. It requires an examination of our hearts and a repentance of our attitudes. **Are we willing to surrender our personal privileges and to welcome this breath of fresh air from the Holy Spirit? When God has something to say, are we willing to listen? Can you hear me now?!? That’s the real challenge for all of us today. Can you hear me now?!?**

Despite people’s disobedience time after time after time, God did not categorically abandon His people. God had been patiently waiting for the right person who would be willing to step up in faith and to respond to his calling. God knew that now was the time to act by reaching out to the young boy Samuel. It was the right time for the prophet Eli relinquish his authority for the next generation of leadership to come. God didn’t look down upon Samuel because of his youth and inexperience, but instead God remained persistent in calling this young boy to respond. **Samuel did not choose God, whereas God had chosen him.**

To be called by God means that God knows one’s name and, in knowing one’s name, exercise a powerful influence on that person.[[1]](#footnote-1) As you know, in the Old Testament, the name of every person means something, whether it reflects upon what had happened or will eventually happen. God called Samuel by his name…even before Samuel knew God. What a powerful claim of this Divine-human relationship, just as the LORD claimed the calling of another young protégé prophet Jeremiah, when the LORD declared ***“before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."*[[2]](#footnote-2)**

The name Sam-u-el, means “**God has heard**” in Hebrew. Indeed, God has heard Samuel’s response when Samuel declared, “***Here I am, LORD. Speak, for your servant is listening.****”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

**When God called, Samuel listened. What about us? When God calls us, are we as inclined to listen to what God has to say?** Are we willing to respond to God, like Samuel did, by saying “**Yes Lord, Speak, for your servant is listening?**” Are we too busy and too occupied with our own lives, minding our own business while failing to see what God is actively doing all around us and in our lives. **How we respond to God’s calling reflects upon our commitment and obedience to God!**

There’s a difference between “hearing” and “listening”? We may hear from the other person, but we are not actively listening or paying attention to what the other person has to say. Are we too concerned about mapping out our strategy, defending, and supporting our own personal views and positions, while denying the interests of others, including God. We leave little and no room in our lives for God.

Furthermore, our text today also reminds us of **the nature of our calling?** **Who** is being called and **Why** are we being called by God? And why God appears to call some but not the others? Does it mean that those who are being called are more worthy than the others? Certainly NOT!

This week, our country will honor and remember yet another legend of prophetic voice and witness - the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. For King, he too was brought up as a protégé in the shadows of his father and his grandfather, ever since he was a young boy. King followed his calling as his faith propelled him into action through his prophetic voice for justice and social equality for all humankind in this world. One’s commitment to witness to this world is generated out of one’s faith and response to God’s love for humanity.

Of all the speeches and sermons that King has given, my favorite one has to do with one’s calling and one’s giftedness to serve. On February 4th, 1968, in his final sermon that he would preach at his own church of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta entitled “***The Drum Major Instinct***”, two months before his tragic assassination, King challenged his audience then (as well as to us today) the importance of service and love for humanity and answering to God’s call in our lives. He identified that we must recognize our own God-given gifts and talents, while paying it forward and giving back to our own community. As King spoke,

*“…If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That’s your new definition of greatness. And this morning, the thing that I like about it . . . by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great. Because everybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love. And you can be that servant…”*

Indeed King’s words and challenge for us all echo the sentiments of our hearts today. Our ultimate motivation to serve is NOT to makes us feel proud of our own achievement or accomplishments, but we are motivate to serve because of LOVE….God’s LOVE that is and our LOVE for others.

When we put aside ourselves and service others first, we begin to see the world from a whole new perspective. As Jesus taught his disciples that ***it is better to give than to receive***.[[4]](#footnote-4) We too shall give of ourselves unconditionally and expect nothing in return. We don’t need to go around letting everyone know what we’ve done or congratulate ourselves of our accomplishments. God knows what we’ve done AND also what we have failed to do. God knows our every intention (good or bad) and any ulterior motivations of our hearts. We serve because it was the RIGHT THING TO DO, even if our names were never mentioned or our works went unrecognized or under-appreciated. But that’s OK. We recognize that the one who is the greatest among you shall be a servant, just as Jesus came not to be served but to serve.[[5]](#footnote-5) The first shall be last and the last shall be first.  **We LOVE because God had first LOVED us**!

God has called each of us to use our gifts and talents, to obey our calling in order to serve God and to serve others. Be a productive member of society…as Martin Luther King once said, ***“If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michaelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well.”***

This is the mystery of how the Spirit works among us. This is the radical faith that we dare to exhibit as we are being called to bear witness to God’s radical love in our human society through our humility, grace and love…however unloving, outlandish, and self-centered our society may have become. God’s LOVE for all humanity shall triumph over any injustice or any super-egotistical human mind of our times. God is still in control and God remains faithful to God’s people. Nothing is going to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our LORD.

May this be a challenge and a reminder for us all that during this season of Epiphany, we are to open our hearts to listen attentively to what God is showing us, even in the midst of a chaotic and disheveled world that we live in today. Together let us prayerfully discern where God’s Spirit may lead us, as we continue this journey from Bethlehem and follow this light of Epiphany to wherever we are being sent. This is the mystery, as well as the certainty, of our faith in our LORD Jesus Christ. ***“Here I am. Speak, Lord, for Your Servant is Listening”.***

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. Price, Joseph L, *Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 1, p.244* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Jeremiah 1:5* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *I Samuel 3:4, 9* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Acts 20:35* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)