

Bringing in the Reign of God
Martin Luther King Day 2018
1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51
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The title of this sermon is "Bringing in the Reign of God," but perhaps an appropriate subtitle would be: "Church Can Be a Dangerous Place to Be!"

Last week we celebrated 3 baptisms, ordained and installed a fantastic new class of elders and deacons, and we celebrated the Lord's Supper together. As we participated in the baptisms, we were called to remember our own...when our identity as a part of God's family was sealed. We also affirmed our own belovedness to God.

God's claim on the life of Jesus as God's beloved was so great that in last week's Gospel lesson we were told that when he was baptized, the heavens were torn open and the Spirit of God descended like a dove. Tearing open is no small act. God responded with power AND love.

The texts this week remind us that in the journey of the Christian faith, it's not enough just to know of our identity as God's very own beloved, we must also follow as well. Christianity is an active faith.

In her book, "Teaching a Stone to Talk," Annie Dillard marvels at the nonchalance of most modern day Christians. *"On the whole," she writes, "I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely evoke? Or, as I suspect, does anyone believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us into our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense..."*

We had better take cover!

This morning's text from the Hebrew Scriptures tells of the story of the call of Samuel. As a bit of background: Hannah had been distressed that she was unable to bear children. She earnestly prayed to God, and she promised that if she could have a child, she would consecrate him or her to the Lord's service. God answered her prayer, and when he was born, Hannah dedicated Samuel to the Lord, praying a prayer very similar to Mary's Magnificat.

Today's story brings us to the point when Samuel is a young man, serving in the temple under the priest, Eli. Eli, was old and had been corrupted by power and politics. God had seen fit for him to pass his torch on to someone new, although Eli did still have some stirring of the Spirit. The scripture says, "The lamp of God had not gone out yet." In the middle of the night, Samuel hears a voice: "Samuel, Samuel!" And he runs to Eli and says, "Here I am!" Eli looks at him strangely and says, "I didn't call you! Go back to bed." The same scenario continues several more times...exasperating them both. After the third time, Eli perceives that something more is happening, that indeed the Lord is calling Samuel. So he tells Samuel that if it happens again to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." And when Samuel hears the voice again and responds with those words, the Lord replies, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears tingle."

Put on your crash helmets! God is about to tear open the heavens just because someone prayed and someone listened! Do you believe that God still works in that way, calling people to be involved in ministries they never dreamed of doing?

Martin Luther King Jr. was someone who fits that bill. He was just a little ole Baptist preacher who continually tried to stay out of the spotlight of national leadership. All he wanted was to be a pastor at a church. He was good and he could preach, alright. His problem, though, was that he was a praying man. And when you stop and pay attention...watch out! You may be surprised at what you hear. ME? DO WHAT? I CANT!

You're right. YOU can't, without God's help. King's openness to God's Spirit of justice and love allowed him to respond to the call to lead people through non-violent protest (modeled after his role model, Mahatma Gandhi) to affect change in the world which still has a ripple effect today. It also got him killed.

So many people think of him mainly as a secular leader, a disrupter of society; and one who would lead people through the Civil Rights Movement. But ALL of King's work was inspired and fueled by his faith through constant prayer.

For instance, the 10 point pledge each person involved in the non-violent movement was required to sign and adhere to is as follows:

1. MEDITATE daily on the teaching and life of Jesus.
2. REMEMBER always that the non-violent movement in Birmingham seeks justice and reconciliation—not victory.
3. WALK and TALK in the manner of love, for God is love.
4. PRAY daily to be used by God in order that all (sic) might be free.
5. SACRIFICE personal wishes in order that all (sic) might be free.
6. OBSERVE with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.
7. SEEK to perform regular service for others and for the world.
8. REFRAIN from violence of fist, tongue or heart.
9. STRIVE to be in good spiritual and bodily health.
10. FOLLOW the directions of the movement and of the captain of a demonstration.

Martin Luther King Jr and other leaders, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who lead the Confessing Church movement during Hitler's regime did cross over into the world of politics, but it was because of what they believed their faith in God required of them.

Bonhoeffer argued, "As much as the Christian would like to remain distant from political struggle, nonetheless, even here, the commandment of love urges the Christian to stand up for his neighbor... In Bonhoeffer's case, acting on behalf of the neighbor took the form of protecting his Jewish neighbors from suffering and dying in concentration camps. And that required him to work, conspiratorially, toward a regime change, as a double agent and traitor to the state. But this work would not have been necessary if Christians had seen the evil of white nationalism and anti-Semitism as antithetical to their faith. Nazis gained power with Christian support." (Sojourner's Magazine Feb 2018).

In the forward to his book, *Why We Can't Wait*, James Washington says, "After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963, King declared in *Why We Can't Wait* that 'we were all involved in the death of John Kennedy. We tolerated hate; we tolerated the sick stimulation of violence in all walks of life; we tolerated the differential application of law, which said that a man's (person's) life was sacred only if we agreed with his views.'"

For King and Bonhoeffer, their faith was intertwined in all of their actions.

It can be dangerous to come to church, folks. I don't know why they call it a sanctuary, since our lives as we know them may be disrupted by God's Spirit moving in our midst. We may be changed.

This church family has listened in the past and has been called to exciting ministries. What will be next? How will God burst open the tidy boxes within which we have been living? We may have people who hear God's voice in a new way and who will lead us in a new direction of exciting ministry and engagement with the world. I hope so! Some may be called to great and powerful ministries within the walls of the church, and others outside: either secular or theologically based. Some may be called to seminary, like Jessica Jones, Chris Delmar, Susan Trucksess and many others from this congregation through the years. Still others may be called to greater financial support of a ministry currently being done or to bring new visions into fruition.

The good news is, we are not called in a vacuum. There are others (people, foundations, even governments) who are working hard around the globe to bring God's reign into being. They may not call it that, but just listen to some of what Nicholas Kristof listed off in his NY Times op-ed last Sunday:

He began by saying: In fact, 2017 was probably the very best year in the long history of humanity.

A smaller share of the world's people were hungry, impoverished or illiterate than at any time before. A smaller proportion of children died than ever before. The proportion disfigured by leprosy, blinded by diseases like trachoma or suffering from other ailments also fell.

Every day, the number of people around the world living in extreme poverty (less than about \$2 a day) goes down by 217,000, according to calculations by Max Roser, an Oxford University economist who runs a website called Our World in Data. Every day, 325,000 more people gain access to electricity. And 300,000 more gain access to clean drinking water.

As recently as the 1960s, a majority of humans had always been illiterate and lived in extreme poverty. Now fewer than 15 percent are illiterate, and fewer than 10 percent live in extreme poverty. In another 15 years, illiteracy and extreme poverty will be mostly gone. After thousands of generations, they are pretty much disappearing on our watch.

Just since 1990, the lives of more than 100 million children have been saved by vaccinations, diarrhea treatment, breast-feeding promotion and other simple steps.

F. Scott Fitzgerald said the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two contradictory thoughts at the same time. I suggest these: The world is registering important progress, but it also faces mortal threats. The first belief should empower us to act on the second. (NY Times 1/7/18)

So how will YOU and I be a part of bringing in God's reign this year?

Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once said, “As my prayer became more attentive and inward I has less to say. I finally became silent. I started to listen—which is even further removed from speaking. Then I learnt that praying is hearing, not merely being silent. This is how it is: To pray does not mean to listen to oneself speaking. Prayer involves becoming silent, and being silent and waiting until God is heard.”

SHHHH! Don't say any of this too loudly. God might get an inkling of our openness. We might say, “I'm fine right here with what I'm doing.” Keep the doors closed, keep the windows shut. Cover your ears and your loved ones' ears. Let's not get too excited, sing too loudly or say our prayers with too much earnestness. God might really think we mean what we're saying! But alas, watch out, the Spirit's already at work here, doing things which will result in ministries beyond our wildest dreams. If we listen, we might just hear God, and be a part of bringing in the reign of God!