

Tingling Ears

Season of Reconciliation & Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday

Second Sunday After Epiphany

January 18, 2015

Jill R. Russell

Texts: 1 Samuel 3. 1-10 (11-20);
Psalm 139. 1-6, 13-18;
1 Corinthians 6. 12-20;
John 1.43-51

Take a quick survey of the texts for the day and you know we are in the territory of call. We move to this place every year in Epiphany. The season of light invites us to explore how God is revealed to us, where we find wisdom, and how we discern our place in God's coming into the world.

Sometimes we read 1 Samuel as a sweet story of call about a small boy being formed to take on a tremendous mantle of responsibility. But this is no sweet story. There is judgment here. The call of Samuel marks the demise of Eli and his line of priests.

One way to read these texts is rather daunting and goes something like this: You are called by God. There is a purpose for your life that you need to discover and walk into. Nothing you do will go unnoticed so if you fail and fall into something twisted and corrupt, God will see. God will not let it go. Justice will be done and if that means setting you aside then so be it.

That is one way of hearing this text. There is another and while this second way of hearing these texts doesn't exactly let us off the hook, it does have a very different emotional field that I think allows us to hear this story as good news and maybe even give us those tingling ears that are promised in this text.

This way of hearing begins the very same way: You are called by God. There is a purpose for your life that you need to discover and walk into. But that purpose is connected to something God is doing and has been doing from the beginning of time. Not only are we in this together we are

in this together with God. God is the one, as Gordon so eloquently put before us last week, who is creating the world. And that work of creation is an ongoing work of which we are now a part. Every time God invites someone to discover their purpose to join in this work of creation and re-creation, it is a joint effort.

The way I described it the first time: God calls and then steps back and watches and observes and sits in judgment. But there is no way we can read Psalm 139 and take that view. This Psalm has to be one of the most beautiful assurances of God's deep and abiding love for us. This Psalm reveals the truth of who we are: as someone put it we are "fully known and eternally loved."¹

When someone makes that kind of promise – to love us from before we were born until the day that we die and beyond – all of sudden being fully known, faults and failures and all, isn't so frightening. When I take into account that the one who knows me fully and sees all of my frailties, every selfish act, every deluded thought, AND also loves me eternally – that knowledge isn't so daunting anymore. In fact, it is freeing. Liberating. I don't have to worry about being cast aside in any ultimate or eternal sense so I can take the long view and see what God is doing – what my place is – and even what my place isn't.

That is what God is doing with Samuel and Eli. The priesthood entrusted to Eli and his sons has become so corrupt and so broken that the only way to move God's people closer to the vision God has given them for a just and peaceable kingdom is to set them aside and start anew. Eli trusts God enough to accept that word of judgment because he knows that his part is in service of a much larger work that God is doing to create something good for Israel and through Israel for the whole of creation

Let's be real for a moment: Eli's reaction here is not typical. Few of us can hold our place and position in God's world with that kind of open hand. We become deeply invested in the work that we do. We regularly lose

¹ Allen C. McSween, Jr, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1 Advent Through Transfiguration* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 252.

track of who called us and for what purpose we are doing what we do. Our egos and sense of worth get inextricably bound up in the choices we make and the things we accomplish. We climb as high as we can go and anyone who comes along and raises questions or points out flaws or failures - we reject and renounce. And because of this fact of human nature, because we become so blind to our own corruption and so closed to efforts of reform, the work of justice and re-creation rarely goes smoothly or without a fight.

Tomorrow, our nation honors the call that God placed on Martin Luther King, Jr. to be an instrument of that work of justice and re-creation within this nation. To be on this side of that movement is a great gift. When we consider the atrocious history we all share of how our nation was forged on land that was ripped from the natives who lived here and built by the sweat and labor of slaves who were brought here for the sole purpose of building a wealth they would never see - when you consider how long it took for us to end slavery and give freedom to the African Americans in our midst and how much longer it took for us to dismantle the laws that kept freedom from being fully realized - when you consider that history - I am so grateful to live on this side of those movements that brought us closer to our values of freedom and justice for all.

It is good and it is right for us to honor the work and legacy of Dr. King because that work of justice and re-creation cost so very much. If you have not yet seen the movie Selma, you have to go! It is an incredible movie. One of the most powerful scenes for me was a quiet moment in the film; not one of the rousing speeches and not one of excruciating scenes of violence. The scene was a moment when Dr. King had just come home from wrangling with other civil rights leaders about the best strategy to move forward and after a frustrating visit to the White House. He comes home and his wife, Coretta, is shaken by yet one more threat against his life. Dr. King cannot sleep and with his head in his hands he calls his friend, Mahalia Jackson, and wakes her in the middle of the night and tells her that he needs to "hear the Lord's voice." She gets out of bed and begins to sing "Precious Lord Take My Hand." I told Brian we had to sing that song today and we will as our call to prayer in a moment.

As I watched that scene, I felt deep in my soul what this work costs – this work of justice and re-creation - because few of us are willing to do what Eli does in this text. Few of us are willing to listen to those who are calling us to account, to hold our positions and power with open hands, and trust God to do what seems good as the one who knows us fully and loves us eternally.

We know the work of civil rights and racial justice is not yet done. The events in our nation in recent months that has spurred a moment – a need for us to stand and declare that *Black Lives Matter* – is evidence of just how much work there is left to be done. As we dig deeply into this work of racial justice, as we give ourselves to reconciliation of any kind, it is easy to feel daunted by the cost of it.

I find hope for this work when I turn my attention to the one who knows us fully – fully enough to sniff out our delusions and failures from a mile away – and loves us eternally so isn't concerned with upsetting us in the moment if it pushes us to get back on the right track and start heading in the right direction.

That is my prayer for us today: to live into our call with open hearts and open hands ready to respond with grace if ever we are called to account because our lives are held in the hands of the Lord – so let God do whatever seems good. Amen.