

2nd Sunday after Epiphany
1.14.24

1 Samuel 3:1-10, 11-20

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.' (455)

Fred Gray was a Civil Rights Activist. Born in 1930 in what he calls the ghettos of Montgomery, Alabama, Mr. Gray became an attorney. He would represent the likes of Rosa Parks. He also became a Member of the Alabama House of Representatives, in which he would serve for forty-five years. To top it all off, he would eventually fulfill his mother's dream of becoming a preacher, but that's another matter.

I heard him interviewed for a story on NPR. Last year, reporter Ayesha Rascoe was searching out the root system of what would become the Civil Rights Movement, a more hidden history than most people know, or at least than *I* knew. Mr. Gray spoke to Rascoe about a meeting with Ms. Parks, prior to the boycott but following her arrest. Both people who'd been activated to work for justice amidst this place of sweltering injustice, Gray and Parks would have lots of

conversations like this, and in this particular one he was remembering the concern they were addressing. It was the activists' need to convince people, regular people city-wide who relied on the bus system to go about their lives, to convince them, yes, to get off the busses but moreover to stay off them "...till there's a nonsegregated basis," in his words.

"In order to do that," Mr. Gray knew, which he remembered telling Ms. Parks, "we need to get a spokesman—somebody who can speak, keep the people together and be able to communicate whatever our request is to the community and to the power structure in Montgomery.

"[Ms. Parks] said, 'Well, Fred, I tell you who the spokesman need to be—my pastor.' Martin Luther King Jr. hadn't been in town long. He'd only been here a year, hadn't been involved in any civil rights activities. 'But one thing he can do,' Ms. Parks said, 'and that is he can move people with words. So that's who we need.'"

Funny, I'd always thought we had Rev. King to thank for Rosa Parks's activism. I'd always thought Dr. King had overseen the training in non-violent resistance that made possible the activism of Rosa Parks. A parishioner in his church, she, I assumed, was activated by him—that is, when I'd finally found out there was anything intentional about Parks's activism, her staying in her seat on that bus.

Because for most of my life, for as long as I'd known about that small, outrageous act, I thought she was just a woman, like any other, who, at the spur of a moment, found herself simply to have had enough, too tired to get up, too over this whole Jim Crow thing. I hadn't known she'd trained for this. I hadn't known she was a spearhead to a whole movement, which she only became through the accidents of history and its story-telling.

But, no, she represents a whole conspiracy, a whole network of people who'd begun to bang this drum, a drum that Dr. King wasn't even the first to bang—and if she came to learn from him, it's because he was called by her, put forth as the leader he would become because she heard something from him that the Movement needed.

I wonder about this desire for it all to have arrived by some more mysterious means. I wonder why it's more appealing to think of Rosa Parks not as having intended and trained, and Martin Luther King not as having been called by a parishioner and activated by a network of people all fully intending to create a movement, but instead called indeed by God—as if these two things are mutually exclusive, as if to be asked by a person to rise to some moment is exclusive of being asked by God to rise to that moment, as if it couldn't possibly be that God's voice might arrive in the voice of some regular old person.

We like to believe in magic, it seems to me. We like to believe some people just have it, an arrival of some mysterious power that makes their lives more courageous, more daring. Some people are just more appealing to God, more the recipient of this strange favor than others, certainly than any of *us*. I mean, who are *we*?

I think we like to believe in that because it excuses us from having to search ourselves for what it is *we're* called to do. It excuses you from the demanding task of taking a chance and giving your life to something beyond yourself and your own petty calculations of what makes you happy or what brings you peace. It frees you from that which requires not only courage for what dangers any such endeavor might bring unto you, but also what requires patience for what is usually slow, plodding work, the work of envisioning, strategizing, coalition-building, compromise-making. Really, it's so much more appealing to think of the Civil Rights Movement as a movement by magic rather than a movement by politics, the drawn-out, constant work of people talking with one another, arguing with one another, compromising with one another, and finding themselves together having taken one more small step forward.

We hate politics, as a society we do, and more and more, and to our own peril. Peril, yes: because the alternative to politics in the modern age is scary: it's fascism, it's force, violence. And yet you hear it all the time. We say it so casually: "I hate politicians. I can't stand politics." They're crooked. The whole thing is so corrupt, we degrade it with our speech, as if the alternative isn't *so much worse*.

Really, beware when people say they don't want another politician in Washington, they want an "outsider," they want someone who isn't so oiled up for the game. They might not fully intend what they're saying, but that doesn't mean they won't get it. They might. *We* might—which would be deeply unfortunate, deeply dangerous.

It probably doesn't help that the call stories Christians, at least, are most familiar with do seem like stories of more mysterious vocation.

Certainly, that's true for the call of Samuel to a life of prophecy. This story seems insistent indeed that the voice of God, which it turns out Samuel was hearing, was very much *not* the voice of Eli, his teacher, which Samuel assumed the first two times is what he was hearing.

Samuel was a boy who'd been dedicated to Eli, Samuel's mother bringing her boy to him as an offering to a holy way. Hannah understood her son to be a miracle child, one given from the Lord to her and so one she would devote back to the Lord once she as his mother was no longer so pressing needed. As for Eli, he was the last of the judges during the couple of centuries of judges.

Following Eli's death, which would be soon, the people Israel and Judah would be ruled by kings, and Samuel would be the one to anoint the first king.

So, this exchange here, a small story of a young boy and his old teacher, is actually a pivotal moment in the long history of this people. From one form of governance to the next, from a form for a small nation to a form for a growing and ever more powerful nation, from a network of judges to a single king: Israel, Judah, these would soon be on the map—which is the significance of the call of God *not* coming to Samuel through Eli. Eli no longer would hold such authority when it came to the people of God. Eli's way would no longer be the way authority is exercised among this nation. There would be something new. Something of youth and vitality, something of direct adventure.

It can happen this way. Something new can be born out of the blue. Some new way can be made of mystical revelation.

It can also happen of the much more mundane.

Surely, this is what Nathanael was giving voice to when, a millennium later, he asked of Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

This, John's version of the call of the disciples, is surprisingly mundane. Though the larger gospel narrative seems, of the four we have (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) the most mystical and indeed mystifying, this, John's call of the disciples, is surprisingly mundane.

It all happens pretty quickly, all in the first chapter of the gospel narrative, a turning of the focus from John who was baptizing to Jesus who, baptized, would now embark on gathering disciples, students who would train themselves in the Jesus way.

The first would be Andrew, who'd been a disciple of John until the moment when John declared to his disciples about Jesus. Andrew would turn from John to follow Jesus, and then would bring along his brother, Simon who would be renamed Peter. These two grew up in the same village as the third to be called, Philip, whom Jesus would pick up when he went the next day to Galilee. And Philip would tell Nathanael that he should come along, too, Philip telling Nathanael, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth," all of which, apparently, sounded entirely too mundane to Nathanael, who asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Much has been speculated about this aspersion. Did Nathanael have a particular hatred for Nazareth and, if so, why? Was Nazareth known for being especially degraded or despicable, or was it just entirely too ordinary? The one whom Moses promised or himself prefigured: the one who

would lead the people in this mighty and world-changing way: this one is alive and moreover is from nearby? Really?

It's like when Jesse and I first visited Stockbridge, to where we knew we'd be moving once he was finished with residency in Cambridge. I pressed upon him, in the accommodations where we were staying, the guest residence at Austen Riggs for the night, I pressed upon him required listening: Arlo Guthrie's "Alice's Restaurant."

He'd never hear the song. I couldn't believe it! He'd never even heard *of* it. "You have to know this song," I insisted. "If you're moving to Stockbridge, you have to know this overlong, ridiculous, wonderful song."

So, we listened to it.

And then we went out to grab a bite to eat. Red Lion Inn. The Lion's Den. Stuffed into a cramped corner with the next table over very close, and now stuffed too with people, a lively party.

I looked over, and puzzled at what I saw, or what I thought I saw. I leaned to whisper to Jess across the table, "I think that's Arlo Guthrie."

He glanced. And he said, "Yeah, it looks like him."

"No, I think that *is* him."

(He noticed us, then, so I confessed: "Sorry, we were *just* listening to 'Alice's Restaurant.' And he asked, incredulous, "*Why?*" Apparently, he knows it's a commitment of some time.)

So, something good, surprise, would come out of Nazareth, dopey Nazareth with all of its normalcy and ordinariness—because shouldn't the one promised of Moses come to us from off high and mighty Sinai? Or out of the terrible, turbulent depths of the sea? Or something a whole lot more impressive, mystical and magical and dazzling, or terrifying?

But, no, the call would come from Nazareth, from someone from Nazareth, which makes me wonder,

what about you? Whence comes your call about how to serve God? Whence arrives your call about how to make the world more akin to the reign of God, about how to make God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven? How arrives your sense about faithfully what to *do*?

Because there's a lot to do, which sometimes, amidst this busy, frenzied, confuzzled world might rather be a matter of *not* doing, of simply being still to know that God is God, being still to witness to the world that God is God.

I don't know the answer to this set of questions. Only you can know, whence comes the call and how you'll respond. Will a neighbor invite you to a book group that will in time endow you with

important authority, or will you have a dream that yours is to make art or to go to law school or to marry your partner and have a child together? There are so many ways to manifest God in the world and, turns out, there are so many means for this revelation of your call.

So, I wonder what it shall be for you.

Thanks be to God.