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1 Samuel 3:1-20

PROPHETS OF TRUTH

“The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” With that sentence at the beginning of our scripture passage, we readers are given a heads up that circumstances are not good. Whenever the word of the Lord is rare, whenever visions for how God intends us to live are not seen or understood, one can expect problems.

When our story begins today, Samuel is just a youth serving in the Temple under his mentor, the priest Eli. Eli was generally regarded as a good priest, but his two sons were causing problems. Eli’s two sons were abusing their power to mistreat women and were taking advantage of their status and position for personal gain. In other words, they were abusing their power and status. Eli had been warned about his sons’ behavior, but he had basically done nothing to curb their behavior.

All that is the backstory for what takes place in our scripture reading today, when we as the readers are told, “the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” We read about the late night voice that calls out Samuel’s name three times; how each time Samuel runs to Eli’s bedroom, mistakenly thinking it is Eli who is calling him; and how Eli sends Samuel back to bed, and how finally after this sequence happens three times, Eli realizes that it must be God who is calling Samuel. And Eli instructs Samuel that the next time he hears the voice calling his name, Samuel is to tell God he is listening. And Samuel does this and then he receives the word of God. And the word of God he receives is an uncomfortable word. For God speaks to Samuel about the judgment that is coming upon Eli and his sons for their abuses—for the sons’ behaviors and for Eli’s refusal to take action to stop the sons’ abuses.

The next morning, Eli wants to know what God told Samuel. And now Samuel must make a really hard decision. For how do you tell the person you serve, maybe even someone you respect, that they have done wrong? But Eli understands something very essential. Eli understands the importance of speaking the truth. And so Eli tells Samuel that he must tell him the truth. “What was it God told you?” he asks. “Do not hide it from me.” And Samuel then tells Eli the difficult truth about the vision of judgment he received from God.

Whenever the word of the Lord is rare, whenever visions of God’s intended purposes for humanity are not widespread, we have always relied upon prophets, prophets such as Samuel to speak God’s words of truth and steer us to better visions for who we can be. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of those prophets. He spoke difficult truths to a country that did not want to hear them. And he gave us an important vision. In his famous speech, King proclaimed, “even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” King gave us a vision of ourselves and our land, and it was a vision that was radically different than the one our nation was living at that time when we were a society that incorporated racism, bigotry, prejudice, and discrimination into its very fabric of being. And by offering us a different vision, King gave us hope and something better to which we could aspire.

But speaking these hard truths was not easy or safe for King. King told a story about a late night experience he had that sounds quite similar to the biblical story of Samuel. He told about how the phone rang late one night at his home and the voice on the other end uttered an ugly and frightening death threat against King and his wife and infant daughter. King had received such threats before, but for some reason, this one really bothered him. And so he got

out of bed and made a pot of coffee and sat at the kitchen table. And there at the table King states, "I found myself faltering." He was overcome by the violent threats against his beloved family and by how powerless he was to prevent harm from coming to them. He was overcome by the magnitude of the work of the Civil Rights Movement to make headway against the mountains of injustice. And there at that table, King began searching for a way to exit, or as he stated, "a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward." He was ready to give up. And he began to pray. "Lord," he prayed, "I'm down here trying to do what's right. I still think I'm right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. Now, I am afraid. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak . . . I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

But as he prayed alone there deep in the night, King heard a voice. And the voice said to him, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even until the end of the world."

That is what we celebrate about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the countless others who were part of the Civil Rights movement. We celebrate that they stood up for what was right, for what was just, and for what was true. In a land and at a time when God's word of truth was rare, in a land and at a time when visions of justice were not widespread, MLK and other prophets of the time helped us hear the voice of God.

Given the deep troubles in our country at this moment, we might wonder if we are living in yet another time when the word of God is rare and when visions of God's truth are not widespread. Divisions within our nation are so entrenched, we cannot imagine what a vision of

unity realistically looks like. A justice where all people are respected, treated fairly, have enough to eat, sufficient income, and equality of opportunities, seems like a fantasy. A pandemic rages out of control, claiming over 300,000 lives and still people object to wearing masks to protect their neighbor. And perhaps the biggest casualty of our time is truth itself. Truth has become disposable.

But while the word of the Lord may be *rare*, God's truth will not be silenced. As in the story of Samuel, God's truth about justice and fairness will be heard. Accountability to the truth is essential, whether for a priest like Eli, or for a president, or for a congressperson, or for ourselves. Samuel had to find the courage to tell his mentor a difficult truth—a word of judgment against his mentor about abuses of power. Eli had the courage to listen to it. Martin Luther King told the nation a truth it didn't want to hear—that our nation was blighted by the disease of racism. And now, now we need people to speak the truth, God's truth, in our time.

The images from that horrifying and ugly attack on our nation's Capitol on January 6th shocked us to our very core. We saw rioters wearing racist t-shirts, photos of nooses on the Capitol steps, people destroying property, carrying racist flags, and yelling hostilities of all kind. This horrifying spectacle of racism and hatred and an assault on democracy prompted many people to exclaim, "This is not who we are! This is not America!"

But such statements are not true. The ugliness on display at the Capitol on January 6th is not *all* of who we are, for sure, but it is indeed *part* of who we are. We like to rehearse a well-worn lie when we say that America is a land that champions and honors freedom. That is in fact the myth we like to tell ourselves because it is more palatable than the truth. Since the very beginnings of our nation, freedom has *not* been afforded to all people. Native Americans had their lands stolen from them. Women were denied equality. Black people were enslaved.

Japanese-Americans were interred in camps. Our nation has embraced the *ideals* of freedom and democracy but has not always lived them out.

But we have been blessed throughout our history with voices of those who do speak the truth, God's truth, and with voices who offer us a vision of who God intends for us to be. We have been blessed with prophets of truth who hold us accountable even when that truth is not easy to hear.

The ultimate words of truth and the ultimate vision of God's intentions for us can be found in Jesus. The life and teachings of Jesus as recorded in those four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John deliver God's truth and offer God's vision for humanity—where the stranger is welcomed, where the outcast is included, where the weak are protected, where second chances are offered, where generosity is extended to those in need, where humble--even sacrificial--service to others is humanity's highest achievement, where compassion is cherished, where one's enemies are shown a kind of love that ensures their welfare. *And* where the difficult truth is honored. We Christians call that kind of accountability to the truth, repentance. As individuals and as a nation, we are accountable to the truth about our mistakes and misdeeds, and called to change.

I pray, and maybe you do too, that in these troubled times in our land, God would raise up for us a prophet like Samuel or Martin Luther King, who could help us hear God's words of truth and see God's vision for justice. We need a prophet at this time who could help us move toward healing and justice. But then, then I remember something. You and I have already been given those words of truth. You and I have already been given that vision. Through Jesus Christ, we are witnesses to God's vision for what is right, and what is just, and what is true. And so the prophet we seek can be found by looking in the mirror. We know, and thus we can bear

God's word into our daily lives and into our actions and into our priorities. We know, and thus we can share a different vision of what God intends for us. You and I are God's prophets of truth and we can join Samuel in responding to God, "Speak, for your servant is listening."