

“When the Good News Is Bad News”  
January 17, 2021  
Scripture: I Samuel 3:1-20; John 1:43-51

Samuel was very young when God spoke to him. He was maybe 12 years old and possibly even younger. He lived in the tabernacle at Shiloh where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. Before he was born his mother, Hanna, dedicated him to the Lord’s service out of gratitude for being pregnant. She took him there to stay probably when he was around 6 years old. So, he was raised all those years by the priest at Shiloh, Eli. In other words, Eli was his father, for all intents and purposes and I’m sure Samuel held him in great affection.

So, imagine what it would have been like for this young boy to be burdened with the message of Eli’s downfall. Now, you might think that Eli would be troubled or angry or resentful that God spoke to Samuel and not to him, but the story doesn’t leave that impression. And we wouldn’t be surprised if Eli were angry at Samuel for delivering this very disturbing news from God, but he seems to take it all in stride, almost as if to say, “Yeah...that sounds like God.” In other words, Eli knew what was coming and was probably just as happy that God was no longer speaking in Israel.

In his book *Telling the Truth*, writer and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner says, “The Gospel is bad news before it is good news.” What he means by that is for those who are in positions of security and comfort, the Gospel, the good news, often comes as a corrective. It comes to knock them off their perches and send them reeling in directions they never imagined possible. In the days of Samuel, when God finally spoke, that was good news for everyone; God was speaking again! But for Eli it meant things were about to change and his place of authority and comfort would disappear.

Any time God speaks through a prophet it’s good news. It means God is paying attention. It means we’re not alone and left to our own devices to figure out how to organize ourselves and live justly with one another. To have God’s prophet give us guidance and insight should always fill us with gratitude and joy. Yet over and over prophets are rejected and God’s voice is ignored.

I’ve been re-reading Martin Luther King’s famous “Letter from Birmingham City Jail.” It’s a concise summary of his theology and his social critique that is being considered as an addition to our church’s collection of confessional statements. King is responding to a group of clergy from the south who are urging him and his colleagues to refrain from non-violent direct action in their efforts to desegregate downtown Birmingham and the rest of the state. These clergy, who identify as supporters of King and the movement, are concerned that he is moving too fast, that he should wait for the right time.

King’s having none of it. He writes at one point, “We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was ‘well-timed,’ according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years

now I have heard the words, ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’”

The good news of release from the bondage of segregation, a bondage every bit as damaging to white people as to Black people, is bad news for those whose comfort and security feel threatened by change. Even for allies to the Civil Rights movement, the good news was bad news. God spoke through that movement; God spoke through the words of Martin Luther King, yet the leaders in power would not hear it. In that sense, old Eli, the target of God’s repudiation, was far wiser than those in power today. At least Eli recognized God in Samuel’s words. He may not have been happy to hear it, but he knew it was true.

And that may be the real difference that matters most. When the good news is proclaimed, no matter how hard it might be to accept, can we recognize it as true? What was at the heart of Martin Luther King’s message? It wasn’t to replace one form of dominance with another. He wasn’t interested in creating a world where white supremacy is replaced with black supremacy. His interest was in proclaiming the truth that all forms of dominance must be abandoned if we are to live up to our own ideals. For that he was accused of being an extremist. A badge he wore proudly. In his letter he asks, “Was not Jesus an extremist in love...was not Amos an extremist for justice...So the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice—or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?”

As Jesus was gathering his followers, his band of disciples, in John’s gospel we find them embracing an extreme devotion with practically no evidence at all. He embodies the good news that crosses the boundaries of prejudice (“can anything good come out of Nazareth?”) and common sense (“do you believe because I saw you under the fig tree?”). And in time, as we know, that good news will become bad news not just for the established authorities in temple and government but for these very disciples themselves as they scatter and hide. The change good news brings, even when it reveals God’s glory, is hard to accept and we all resist it to some degree.

Yet, as Eli knew and Samuel would learn, as Jesus intended and his disciples would eventually understand, good news always sets us free. It releases us from the bondage of a social construct where my improvement requires another be diminished. It releases us from enslavement to prejudices that create systems of domination on the basis of income or ethnicity or skin color. Even when it upends the status quo and unseats those in power, and feels like bad news to some, everyone is set free.

I’m convinced that’s what King believed he was doing by writing and marching and speaking. He was bringing good news to set everyone free. As he says in his letter, “One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, and thusly, carrying our whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the formulation of the Constitution

and the Declaration of Independence.” It is that legacy, rooted deeply in the good news of God’s reign, of God’s voice speaking again, that legacy we’re called to embrace and reveal and sustain. Because God is calling us in this moment. God is calling us to tell good news through acts of compassion and justice. God is calling us to withstand the resistance of those whose places of power and privilege are threatened. God is calling us to be set free of our prejudices and hatreds and fears; calling us to sit up and respond, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Amen