

THE THIRD TIME

First Samuel 3: 1-10

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University Church of Chicago

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I begin with some words from a man who died in 1989 and was one of the twentieth century's finest poets/novelists/philosophers. Robert Penn Warren wrote:

Here I am tempted to construct a little fairy tale. Once upon a time, there was a bumbling and kind-hearted old father named Science, and he had a smart, brawny son who found the father's way of life dull, and so set forth to make his fortune. Not far on his journey he met a beautiful, golden-haired lady with a bewitching smile. Her name was Money. Now Money had a bad reputation in certain quarters, especially among old, stuffy folk, and it was even rumored that she had borne several bastards. But bastards or no, she had never lost her girlishly lissome figure, delicious complexion, promising smile, and eye for brawny young fellows. Of course this young fellow, having been raised in so retired a way, knew nothing of the gossip about the lady. So they got married and lived happily ever after—at least, until right now—for he was blind to her little private diversions and was wrapped up in a beautiful, thriving little son who grew as fast as a beanstalk and whose name was Business Culture. I forgot to tell you the name of the brawny young fellow who married the woman named Money . His name was Technology.

We come together to worship God on the Second Sunday of the Season of Epiphany, a Sunday on which we remember one of God's great prophets/pastors/writers/martyrs—the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as we also celebrate the approaching inauguration of Barack Hussein Obama as the forty-fourth President of the United States of America. You and I, born and reared in Business Culture, married to Money, giving birth to children named Technology, have a hard time confronting events like the call of Samuel to ministry. It's not merely that the miraculous story of God's voice speaking is beyond our ken. It is also that it violates our neat categories.

The problem that you and I have as mainline Protestants with hearing God's voice or seeing God at work in the election of our nation's first African American president is that everything non-practical, everything that cannot be explained or rationalized has been squeezed out of our religion.

That's precisely our problem. Another wonderful Southern writer, one of my favorites, that difficult Catholic Christian from Milledgeville, Georgia, Flannery O'Connor wrote to her friend Sally Fitzgerald,

One of the effects of modern liberal Protestantism has been gradually to turn religion into poetry and therapy, to make truth vaguer and more relative, to banish intellectual distinctions, to depend on feeling instead of thought, and gradually to believe that God has no power, that

God cannot communicate with us, cannot reveal God's self to us, indeed has not done so and that religion is our own sweet invention.

The older I get and the more difficult it becomes for me to understand the Church as well as my own spiritual journey, the more I am thrust back on the transcendent nature of faith. Thus, when I hear the story of the call of Samuel, I am moved not only by the miraculous nature of the event but also by its context. It is much, much more than a nice little story of an individual's call to prophecy and ministry.

The story begins on an ominous note. Not only is "the word of the Lord...rare in those days," but the leadership over Israel is corrupt. (Does any of this sound familiar as we remember the past eight years and view what seems **not** to be happening in the Church these days?) Eli's sons have been using their status as priests to satisfy their own desires: consuming the precious fat of the sacrifices and lying with the vulnerable women who, like Samuel's mother Hannah, had come to worship the Lord at the tent of meeting.

But who will speak truth to power? Who dares to stand and, by giving voice to the Lord's proclamation, unleash God's power into the affairs of rulers and nations? In this "nice little story," a new office begins to emerge: the office of "trustworthy prophet of the Lord" (v. 20).

Remember, first of all, how Samuel came to the temple in the first place. His mother Hannah had been barren for years; she wanted more than anything to be a mother, but "because God loved her," the narrative says in the first chapter, "he had closed her womb." Year after year she had gone to the temple; she had prayed and prayed. She promised God that if she were given a son, she would give him back as a nazirite, that is, a monk, a visionary-in-training, one whose whole life is given to God's service in the temple.

And one day God answered her prayer. So, when the child was weaned, she took him up to the temple and "lent him to the Lord...as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord. She left him there for the Lord" (1:28).

So the boy Samuel lives and learns and works in the temple with the old priest, Eli, who serves as a spiritual parent. Although Eli's eyes may be failing him, his knowledge of the Lord and his experience of the revelation of God's word are not. It takes both the attentiveness of the young Samuel's ears and the wisdom of the old priest's heart and mind to understand God's call to serve. Similarly, it takes both the authority of the failing priest and the obedience of his youthful protégé to bring God's judgment to fruition. And in doing so, both Eli and his corrupt sons will be destroyed.

Still, Eli trusts in God's purposes: "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him" (3:18).

So, we hear of "Eli lying down in his room," and "Samuel lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was." The Lord calls, "Samuel! Samuel!" and the boy answers, "Here I am!" He runs to the blind old priest and says, "Here I am, for you called me." But the priest answers, "I did not call; lie down again." Samuel does not yet know God's voice, so he goes back and the same thing happens again. This

third time Eli's instructions are different: "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

So God comes a third time and stands there, "calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!'" And Samuel says, "Speak for your servant is listening." God answers with frightening words: "I am about to punish the house of Eli forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them."

What do you do when you answer God's call and God's response turns out to be 180 degrees away from what you expected? Samuel answers, "Speak, for your servant is listening." And God says, "I am about to do something that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle." This is a vision of words and hearing, a vision of response and destruction.

On Martin King's birthday, it's instructive for us to consider the truth of Samuel's call: that God destroys as well as builds up. The issues facing us in the twenty-first century in America are about class as well as race. Most of us in this sanctuary on this January morning are, whether we admit it or not, among the richest people in the world. Indeed, in the history of the world. Whether we are black or white, most of us are professionals who live in comfortable homes and lead comfortable lives and enjoy friendships with people of our class. Whether we live in Hyde Park or Bronzeville or Kenwood or Woodlawn or Oak Park or another suburb, we live among folks like us. We pride ourselves on being a city of neighborhoods, but as recent studies have shown, that fact shuts us out from real integrative living.

The voice of God is hard to discern, because the answers God gives are paradoxical and sometimes confusing. It takes prayer and reading of Scripture and worshiping God in a community of faith to hear and to feel our ears tingle. It means that we have to move from the opinions offered by the Chicago Tribune or the Chicago Sun-Crimes to the convictions that come from faithful response to God's Word. If we are to hear God's voice, we must be willing to say, "Hear I am, Lord. I am listening."

If you were—God forbid—forced to go back and read my sermons over the past five decades, I suppose you would find one theme more than any other running through them. What is God's will? How do we know God's will? How do we answer God's call effectively and truthfully? Never can our answer be based on money or technology or business. We must always answer God's call with trust that all things really do work together for good. I live by the words of Paul in the eighth chapter of Romans:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

(Romans 8: 36; 37-39)

Too many of us are too set in our opinions, too concrete in our prejudices, and we have to know our limits. When Ty Cobb, one of the greatest baseball players who ever lived and one of the most despicable human beings in the history of the sport was seventy years old, a reporter asked him, ‘What do you think you would hit if you were playing these days?’

Cobb, who was a lifetime .367 hitter, replied, “About .290, maybe .300.”

The reporter said, “That’s because of the travel, the night games, the artificial turf and all the new pitches, like the slider. Right?”

“No,” said Cobb, “it’s because I’m seventy.”

It’s important to know our limits as well as our possibilities. God calls a boy who lives in a corrupt culture, and the call results in God destroying the boy’s mentor and spiritual guide and the culture that has spawned him. Still, he answered God’s call. It took God three tries to get him to hear the truth, but when Samuel answered that third time, he did not know what the future held. And neither do we. But we live in the certainty that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Taylor Branch writes of the experience of Martin Luther King during the worst days of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, when their home at been bombed and the forces of segregation were at their strongest:

The limitless potential of a young King free to think anything, and therefore to be anything, was constricted by realities that paralyzed and defined him. King buried his face in his hands at the kitchen table. He admitted to himself that he was afraid, that he had nothing left, that the people would falter if they looked to him for strength. Then he said as much out loud. He spoke the name of no deity, but his doubts spilled out as a prayer, ending, “I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.” As he spoke those words, the fears suddenly began to melt away. He became intensely aware of what he called an “inner voice” telling him to do what he thought was right. Such simplicity worked miracles, bringing a shudder of relief and the courage to face anything. It was for King the first transcendent religious experience of his life...the moment awakened and confirmed his belief that the essence of religion was not a grand metaphysical idea but something personal, grounded in experience—something that opened up mysteriously beyond the predicaments of human beings in their frailest and noblest moments.

In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard tries to understand who is a saint. What are the attributes of a person who does hear the Word of God and lives by it? How can we know such a person by the evidence of her life? Kierkegaard calls that kind of person a “knight of faith,” and after tracking his quarry, this elusive figure for many pages and through many labyrinthine detours, he candidly admits that he has never actually spotted “any reliable example of the knight of faith.” But he allows himself to imagine an encounter with such a genuinely good person, a meeting that provokes a shocked gasp:

“Here he is. Acquaintance made. I am introduced to him. The moment I set eyes on him I instantly push him from me. I leap backwards. I clasp my hands and say half aloud, “Good Lord, is this the person? Is it really the one? Why, he looks like an internal revenue agent!”

To be a saint in the parlance of the Bible is not to be perfect or especially pious or decidedly brilliant or one who exhibits certain traits that can easily identify you as spiritual. To live as a saint according to the Bible is to answer God's call, trust in God's will and live within the community of faith called the Church.