

Second Sunday after Epiphany (2B) – January 18, 2015
I Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; I Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Today's readings share the stories of the calling of the prophet Samuel and, 1000 years later, the calling of Jesus' first disciples. And this week we remember the call and witness of a modern-day prophet, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In our first reading we hear the story of the young temple assistant, Samuel, who mistook God's calling him as a voice in the night coming from another room in the Shiloh temple where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. After approaching the elderly priest Eli for a third time that night, saying to him, "Yes...you called?" Samuel is wisely told that the next time he should just remain right where he is and say, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening," – and then listen. And so he does and gets an earful about the future of the old priest's household, with implications for his own ministry and the future of all Israel. Thus begins Samuel's call—his prophetic vocation. And in our gospel we hear about the call of Jesus' disciples and their capacity, or incapacity, for listening to their calls—especially Nathanael the impetuous one, known as Bartholomew in the other gospels.

Now as the old adage goes, God gave each of us two ears and one mouth, so you'd think it would make sense that we would listen twice as much as we speak. True worship is defined in the 40th Psalm [v. 6] as the gift of an open ear (literally translated, "ears you have dug for me"). Of course, that's a perennial problem for folks like me, for generally speaking, we clergy are generally speaking! Attentiveness, listening, is making a conscious effort to hear, with the heart and the mind. In very specific terms, God is constantly calling each of us in many and varied ways—through our memories, dreams, reflections, and through the many voices that come to us from within and without. If we would but stop, look and listen, we might discover our vocation—God's call—somewhere through these voices. One of the recurring notes of biblical judgment is the damning and almost despairing line, "they have ears to hear but they hear not." This does not refer to physical deafness, but to all the distracted, distorted or detached ways that people are deaf to God and to the cries of God's creation.ⁱ We are easily *distracted* by the myriad voices that come to us every day. Like Samuel, we can easily mistake God's voice calling for something or someone else, and rush away without waiting for the message. We can also easily *distort* the voice of God coming to us. Like Nathanael, we can misinterpret a divine message through our distorted or prejudicial perspectives—the way Nathanael, having heard Jesus was from a town even more remote than his own, stated, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" At least Nathanael went ahead with Philip when he said, "Come and see." Along with distraction and distortion, we often *detach* from our capacity to listen attentively by being too fixated on the doing of many tasks at the same time, as well as by our personal insecurities, or, sometimes, just not really caring. The sounds of our own organizational and personal needs can drown out even the clearest sounds of God calling.

Our readings today challenge us to listen attentively to the true source and nature of vocation—our calling by God, both as individuals and as a community. Frederick Buechner writes, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness, and

the world's deep hunger, meet."ⁱⁱ So, what does that mean for you? How do you find that intersection? And how can you tell if it's God calling you there? What does being called mean as you move through the various arenas in your life and through which your call may be lived out?

Quaker educator Parker Palmer suggests that we start by looking to the past and present at the places and experiences in our own lives where we can discover just what our sources of deep gladness are; and *from there* we can then connect to the world and its hungers.ⁱⁱⁱ But for a long time I have had this reversed. My own vocational journey – albeit grounded in a sense of gladness in God's love, presence and purpose in my life – nonetheless, for years, was focused on the latter half of Buechner's quote. In other words, I focused on what I *ought* to do, what I thought I *should* do, to help the common good. And I focused a lot less on the first part, in other words, what *truly gladdens* me in my life, what truly makes me come alive. I've spent a good bit of my time living life from the outside in more than from the inside out, at times trying to imitate my role models and heroes more than listening to my own heart and discovering my own birthright gifts. Parker Palmer asserts that "before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, instead listen for what it intends to do with you. And before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, instead let your life tell you what truths you [already] embody and what values you truly represent."^{iv} I have learned that I need to listen for how God has already spoken to me, throughout my life experiences, rather than continually pursuing imperatives of acting only according to what I think I ought to do. In other words, a true sense of vocation does not come from willfulness or obligation; rather, it comes from attentive listening. The word "vocation" itself comes from the Latin "vocare" – meaning call. Vocation does not first and foremost mean a goal or task that you have to pursue; rather, it primarily means a calling that you listen for.

Over the past few years I've been listening though some "cracked-open" places in my life. A refrain in my own rediscovery of vocation is that verse from the Leonard Cohen song that goes, "Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in" – or gets out, I might add.^v Over the past few years, I've become more and more "cracked open," if you will, re-discovering that it is an illusion that authentic ministry comes out of my strengths only, rather than out of my weaknesses and limitations as well. I'm becoming more "cracked open" as my competencies are questioned or even broken apart. I'm becoming more "cracked open" as my limitations bump up against reality. I am also more "cracked open" realizing my illusions of invulnerability and indispensability are just that: illusions. But at the same time however, the deep gladness which most often doesn't lie on the surface of my existence is being re-discovered in the cracks – the cracked-openness of my life.

As I look for that deep gladness in the places in my life where I've been "cracked open," as it were, and can rediscover my true self, I find there the self that can intersect with and be given to addressing some of the world's deep hungers and the common good. I can then continue to seek a right relationship with institutions with which I have had a lifelong lover's quarrel – institutions such as the Church. Through all this I find myself on a journey described well by the poet May Sarton who wrote, "Now I become myself. It's taken time,

many years and places. I have been dissolved and shaken, Worn other peoples' faces."^{vi} I'm still on that journey. As I continue to listen for my true self behind roles and action, behind masks and identities, I am becoming myself – discovering the places both where I exert my best energies and where I am being dissolved or shaken and cracked open, and rediscovering a deep gladness. That is my hope for all of you as well, that in the time ahead, you continue to seek in yourself and amongst yourselves the places where your deep gladness is to be found—where you come alive—and from there, continue to connect with the world's deep hunger in whatever appropriate ways. From this comes a sense of true vocation as real and meaningful as the calling of Samuel or Jesus' disciples. And it starts with the simple and open posture recommended to Samuel, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

ⁱ As one observer put it,

"The spiritual intimation of unseen realms, subliminal or supernatural, led to an ancient culture of intuitive hearkening, as gods and humans entered into direct conversation with one another. Hebrews and Christians sought God's word, propitiating him to incline his ears to their individual cries (Psalm 88), while Jeremiah (6:10) blasted the 'uncircumcised' ears of those who failed to comprehend the deity's subtleties...Medieval Christians [portrayed that] Christ (as the Word of God) was conceived in his mother's womb after a dove entered her ear...[And] the psychoanalyst Theodor Reik, who once claimed that 'the intangible that is invisible as well as untouchable can still be audible,' suggested in his classic text, *Listening with the Third Ear*, that we truly hear through greater use of our intuition" —and our God-given imagination and faith, I would add. (Quoted in "Ear" in *The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism*, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 358).

ⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (London: Collins, 1973) p. 95. Additional quotes:

"Finding our vocation [calling] is not just "finding my lifework," nor even "finding what God wants me to do." Finding our vocation is largely a matter of finding where God is, the God who hides in our neighbors, in ourselves, and in [the] world. Once we notice the Hidden God...at work-in the workplace, families, the community, and the church-and when we realize the part we play in [God's] design, we have found our vocation." - from Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *God at Work* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002).

"Listening for God is not just learning religion. It's connecting the absolutely ordinary life you live—your routine, your work, your questions, your pain—with the hunger everyone of us has for deep meaning and deep community." – "A new era for you" William McD. Tully (New York: St. Bartholomew's Church)

"Don't ask what the world needs. Rather ask - what makes you come alive? Then go and do it! Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." - Howard Thurman

"If you bring forth what is in you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is in you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you." - Jesus, from the Gospel of Thomas, Saying 70

"...Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" - Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day" in *The Truro Bear and Other Adventures: Poems and Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), p. 65.

"The prayer of our souls is a petition for persistence; not for the one good deed, or single thought, but deed on deed, and thought on thought, until day calling unto day shall make a life worth living." – W.E.B. Du Bois, *Prayers for Dark People* (Herbert Aptheker, ed. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
 If I am not for others, what am I?
 And if not now, when? - Rabbi Hillel, Ethics of the Fathers, 1:14

iii Parker J. Palmer, Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000).

iv Palmer, *Ibid.*, p. 3

v As another observer put it,

“A crack can be an opening...while the crack in an ordinary teacup makes it a leaky container, no longer safe. The original meaning of the word comes from the sound it makes, as if something is breaking, the connotations often negative. Cracks evoke dryness, like...barren earth...the dry lips of fever...Psychologically, a crack in the façade suggests a false persona. The splitting experience of mental illness is often felt as if one’s whole world is breaking apart, concretely envisioned in the poet Weldon Lee’s words: ‘The crack is moving down the wall.’ Our voice cracks in a moment of insecurity, but we may be restored by ‘cracking up’ as we burst out laughing. Then there are the cracks...which lead to other realities...as Leonard Cohen describes it...‘There is a crack in everything / that is how the light gets in.’ The new day arrives at the crack of dawn with all its potentials—a gateway between night and day...where prayers travel up to heaven. The word ‘crack’ is also used for decoding an ancient alphabet or a secret language [or hidden truth]...[But] when something ‘falls between the cracks’ it is forgotten or lost...” (Quoted in “Crack” in The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images *Ibid.*, p. 782).

vi Quoted in Palmer, *Ibid.*, p. 9. As another interpreter of archetypal symbols put it,

“Masks portray the human ‘life drama’ in all its manifold aspects, especially the compelling, ambiguous, sometimes revelatory and often treacherous search for the ‘real self’ behind our more familiar self-images. As the human wearer of a mask becomes obscured, he or she is transformed into the archetypal patterns the mask evokes...Since the mask stands between one’s self and the world, it has a dual nature: It looks both in and out. A mask can disguise, cover, veil, lie, capture, release, reveal, project, protect, disown, recollect, deceive, dissociate, embody and transform...There is a similarly terrorizing aspect to being identified with one’s persona, with our contemporary ‘tribal roles—the masks through which we enter and live in the world, such as ‘spouse,’ ‘doctor,’ ‘artist,’ ‘mother’...”

Sorting this out, in other words, becoming aware of one’s masks and identifications, the living ‘masquerade,’ what is hidden and what is revealed, what is unduly pressured by conformity, and what is emergent and true, is part of the [vocational journey and the] work of individuation...The etymology of ‘mask’ traces back to Arabic, meaning ‘buffoon,’ then into the European ‘masquerade,’ and the modern meaning ‘to hide or protect the face.’ This nuance within masking speaks to feelings of vulnerability...to human suffering and to ‘saving face.’ A mask provides protection from the powerful affects of archetypal states, and affords an indirect relationship with emotions and psychological patterns, which might be overwhelming if experienced directly, ‘in your face.’ ‘Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell the truth,’ observed Oscar Wilde. On the other hand, there are those who are most themselves when they finally remove the mask.” (Quoted in “Mask” in The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images *Ibid.*, pp. 722, 724).