

Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Preached during COVID, via ZOOM

I don't claim any special insight into dreams, but I have noticed that our readings for the last several weeks have been full of them. Mary's vision of the angel Gabriel. Joseph's dream about the safety of his baby. The Magi dreamed last week about the threat of Herod. And, this morning, young Samuel lying on his sleeping mat by the altar of God, experiencing God's voice in the middle of the night.

To sum up the old testament lesson : Eli is the old prophet and keeper of the altar of God. He is blind. When his protege Samuel says he is hearing voices in the night, Eli dismisses it. Until the voice is persistent and Eli begins to wonder whether God is speaking to Samuel, which it turns out to be the case. And the old order passes away, and the new order is born.

I like this story for many reasons. In the church we can get a little stuck in our ways, and it's nice to know that this dynamic has been around for thousands of years. The older keepers of the altar can get stuck in our ways and have a hard time listening to the next generation. And then, we can sometimes be surprised when God speaks directly to them and has a plan for them.

The other thing I like about this story is a line at the very beginning: "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; vision were not widespread." I wonder at that. Is it that the word of the Lord is ever rare? Is it more that there are times when we have better hearing for it than others. I might offer this time in which we are living as a time when it seems like the word of the Lord is rare. I cannot open the news without finding myself confronted with some kind of story filled with selfishness, hopelessness, grief, fear, and sometimes staggering cynicism. It would be really easy for me to think — and on my worst days I'm afraid that I sometimes dip into this kind of thinking — that the word of the Lord is rare these days.

But the story teaches, and indeed many, many Bible stories teach the same — that God is always at work in places you might not expect. You would think that God Almighty might appear to the old prophet at the center of the shrine. Instead, God appears to the neophyte in the other room. You cannot be a person of faith in this world and not be on the lookout for God's work in unusual places.

Because, at the end of the day, God will send the visions we need. God will send the dreams. Tomorrow, the United States takes a day to memorialize the work and witness of The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. This year, the observance is particularly poignant, as the country reels from a summer of protests over police brutality in the Black community, of voter suppression tactics in neighborhoods with large populations of color, and, of course, with the swearing in of the first female Vice President on the United States in our history, who happens also to be the first person of color to hold that position. And so, it is with fresh eyes that we examine the legacy

of the Civil Rights movement in this country and with fresh ears that we hear the words of its most well-known prophet:

On the Washington Mall — the same Mall so recently in the news — brother Martin said these words: “Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.” And that was the dream, as articulated by one of the great preachers in American history.

So who is speaking now? Who is the Samuel that we need to be listening to? The great strength of the church is that it is an institution that can weather the changes in history. And, of course, its great weakness is that it is an institution, with all the bureaucracy, gridlock, and lack of imagination that implies. But our salvation is in our scriptures. Our salvation is in our stories. And our salvation is in our faith that God is indeed sending dreams into the world — dreams of justice, faith, and healing. And we believe, along with brother Martin, that the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice. God really is speaking right now; we just have to make sure that we unclog our ears.

I realize that this sermon can slip a bit into platitudes. It's well and good to know that God is sending dreams, but what, concretely does that mean for God's children? Especially during a pandemic when it's not as easy to just pop down to a rally or a soup kitchen to try to bring healing to the world. I think it means that we have to get creative. And, on this eve of Martin Luther King day, I think it means that those of us who have not experienced the United States from the point of view of people of color need to find some humility and need to exercise the faculties of our ears more than the faculties of our mouths.

I do not know who the next Samuels are in our community, in our city, in our world. But I do know that they are — even now — receiving their visions from God. And, for my part, I hope very much that when they confess to me what it is God is doing in the world, I can follow rather than berate or tease. If colleagues serving black churches tell me that they get pulled over more frequently by police, I need to unlock my ears to hear that, even though it is very different from my experience. And if members of our congregation who are not white tell me that this year has been particularly difficult for them because of the constant barrage of racist garbage that comes out of the television and even from some of our politicians, then I need to be a listening voice and a supportive friend. And if I am challenged to interrogate some of my own behaviours in light of the national movement for racial justice, I believe that it is my call to listen, to attend, to pray, to repent, and to change.

The church is always reforming, it is always moving from Eli to Samuel in every generation. This can be scary, but I also think it is an absolute gift. We must thank God for the prophets sent among us to help us cleave to God, human failings aside. And we must also thank God for the dreams that come to us in the night — encouraging us to remake this world into something that looks a bit more like the heavenly commonwealth of God. Or, as the prophets teach us to say, “speak God, for your servant is listening.” Amen.