

## **“Words for Even Our Time”**

Rev. Brian Henderson • January 15, 2012

Text: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

One morning this past week Joel was down in our family room while I was up in the kitchen getting dishes put away after having run the dish washer. While I was working...Joel came upstairs and rather randomly and yet intently asked me, “Dad...do you love me?” And I said, “Yes Joel...I love you.” And with that he said simply, “Thanks.” And he turned around and went back downstairs and continued playing.

My heart-warming exchange with Joel reminded me of a story out of book by Mitch Albom...the story was an illustration out of a rabbi’s sermon...the story goes...

A little girl came home from school with a drawing she’d made in class. She danced into the kitchen, where her mother was preparing dinner. “Mom, guess what?” she squealed, waving the drawing. Her mother never looked up. “What?” she said, tending to the pots.

“Guess what?” the child repeated, waving the drawing. “What?” the mother said, tending to the plates. “Mom, you’re not listening.” “Sweetie, yes I am.”

“Mom,” the child said, “you’re not listening with your eyes.”

Our text today, I would suggest, has something to do with listening...listening with our eyes...and with our ears...but also with our hearts...our actions...our very lives.

These scriptures out of First Samuel tell the story of a child who was from the earliest of ages given to God to literally grow up around and learn from the priests in the sacred worship spaces of the ancient Israelites. It's the story of Samuel, the son of Hannah...who until giving birth to Samuel was barren.

Samuel was a child who would grow to become a well respected and sought-after judge and prophet for the Israelites. Samuel would one day be called upon to bless and anoint, Saul, the first king of ancient Israel.

When I think of the story of Samuel...I think of the story and life and words of one of our modern day judges and prophets...a person whose life and legacy we remember today and this weekend...the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Earlier last year Joe and I had the chance to visit the King Center in Atlanta, Georgia. We spent time with a childhood friend of Dr. King's, a retired American Baptist pastor and denominational leader and friend, the Rev. Dr. Albert Paul Brinson, known by most as "Al." Al walked Joe and I up and down Auburn Avenue and he took us into and through Dr. King's childhood home. At one point we stood at the door looking into what was Dr. King's personal

office at the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Our hands and feet touched the walls and furniture and hallways Dr. King's hands and feet traversed countless times.

As the prophet Samuel was charged to call people to faith and to justice so was Dr. King.

Among his thousands of famous and well-known and oft repeated words...there are these words that for me stand out. "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

*Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.* Thought-provoking words. Hopefully...more than thought-provoking...they're action-provoking words as well.

In some ways...these words speak about the challenging work to which the young Samuel was called. The part of the story we read today is the easy part...it's the pretty sounding part...it's the part of the story that people who remember the stories of Samuel, remember.

The "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" part.

What comes after where we left off is the part where God tells Samuel that he must tell Eli that Eli and his sons will die because of their irresponsible actions and attitudes.

Samuel...could have been silent. Samuel could have chosen to not deliver the difficult news he was given. He could have sold-out and hid the news entrusted to him.

Instead...Samuel...like the prophets who would come after him and like the Dr. Kings and prophets of our day...Samuel called upon folk to do justice...to love kindness...and to walk humbly with God.

*Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.*

These are words for our time that challenge us all to think about how we live...how we live out a faith like Jesus' that loves...

What things...what people...what realities of life...matter to you...and matter for others?

Sometimes I fear that our Christianity keeps us living and believing too comfortably. Sometimes I fear that as long as we're able to figure things out for ourselves or at least to formulate ideas and beliefs that fit our needs and frame of reference...then we feel less the need to listen with compassion to the needs and realities of others...we feel less the urgency to listen to and for what really matters.

*Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.*

I don't know about you...but I don't want my life to end because I fail to articulate or communicate the convictions about life and faith and love and justice and reality that stir within me.

It's a scary thing when one begins to speak about such stirrings of life and faith...it's a scary thing when one answers the call...or the calls...that do come from God when we like Samuel really listen...when we listen with our ears...and our eyes...and our hearts and with our actions...

The story is told about Dr. King...

...that his struggle of faith reached a crescendo on Friday night, January 27, 1956. That night, Martin returned home near midnight after a long strategy session with his colleagues. Coretta [his wife] was sleeping soundly, but Dr. King was too preoccupied to fall asleep. The phone rang and a sneering voice told King that if he wanted to remain alive, he had to leave Montgomery in the next few days.

Martin hung up and felt devastated. He could not take it any more. Restless and fearful, he went to the kitchen, made some coffee and sat down at the kitchen table.

Dr. King described this experience in his own words saying:

*I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.*

*The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. 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.*

*At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying:*

*“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.”*

Three days later the King home was bombed and the family nearly killed. Dr. King later wrote about this incident, “My religious experience a few nights before had given me the strength to face it.”

I wonder what matters in life right now really matter for you? What matters are you aware of that matter for others? How are people you know and love and for whom you care deeply experiencing life and faith? Are they being loved as you yourself experience levels of love and acceptance? And if they're not...what can you do about it?

Or maybe you are longing for and in need of love compassion...don't give up...don't give in...remember that you are a beloved child of God and that you matter greatly.

Don't forget the words of Emmanuel—God with us—don't forget the words of Jesus which say even to us today...

*And remember...I AM with you always...*

If you feel alone and overwhelmed...if you're feeling like life as you know it is slipping away...if you are scared and fearful of what is about to be...hear again today that God will keep you and hold you and help you always.  
Amen.