

Accountability
Epiphany 2B
PPC
17 January 2021

Psalm 139
1 Samuel 3:1-20

God is going to do a new thing, so large that it will make us tingle. “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle” (1 Sam. 3:11). In these difficult and challenging and frightening times, I’m looking for the news that will make my ears tingle.

Connie Shultz wrote in a column this week “There are so many Christians who bear no resemblance to those using God as an excuse to be hate mongers and traitors, but they are invisible because they are silent. I used to admire this as humility, but it now risks becoming aiding and abetting. As the late Rev. William Sloane Coffin wrote ‘Christ came to take away our sins, not our minds.’”¹ We know what we must do.

In this season of Epiphany, we celebrate the manifestation of God in the early life of Jesus. Centuries before his birth, however, God’s revelation to Samuel established a model of divine selection of a boy to introduce a radical transition from a traditional priestly family to a new priestly lineage. Luke most probably drew from this story as he crafted his story of the birth and early life of Jesus. He echoes the recognition that the child “continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and with the people” (1 Sam. 2:26) when he relates that Jesus “grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40).

The lectionary would have us read verses 1-10 in chapter 3 of 1 Samuel and include verses 11-20 as optional. Those first ten verses make for a lovely discussion on

¹ <https://www.creators.com/read/connie-schultz/01/21/christian-hate-i...>

the nature of call and an uplifting sermon about the call of young Samuel. If we continue the reading, as we have done, we learn about God's judgment on the house of Eli. God gives Samuel the news that change of leadership is afoot because of the abuse of priestly power by Eli's sons. There is a larger story here than simply the story of call. Roger Gench, in his column on this passage in this week's *Outlook* suggests that a preferable word to "judgment" might be "accountability." This is not to soften the way that we look at the behavior of Eli's sons but to point out that in judgment there is a call for accountability. "Eli's sons egregiously abused their priestly power and the story of the call of Samuel is about holding them accountable."²

Again, when we look at the way that Jesus died we see that one of the reasons Jesus was crucified was because he called out those who abused power and held them accountable. The Bible is filled with stories about speaking truth to power.

On this weekend as we celebrate the life of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the midst of the chaos that has descended upon us, we must recognize that just as those long ago characters were called out to speak truth to power, so today are our politicians. As surely as religious institutions are accountable, so are our politicians. An important aspect of the church's witness is holding public and religious leaders responsible for their use of power. Dr. King wrote "A church that has lost its voice for justice is a church that has lost its relevance."

In April of 1518, the year after Martin Luther posted his 95 theses, he gave a defense of the Reformation in the Heidelberg Disputation. In this document, Luther makes a clear distinction between what he calls a "theology of glory," which "calls evil

² Roger Gench in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Mon. Jan 11, 2021.

good and good evil” and a “theology of the cross,” which “calls the thing what it actually is.” Wow! In 1518 they were dealing with the same kind of issues! Today, when we refrain from speaking the truth, when a majority of a national party will not say that that we have just held a fair election, that is exactly what Luther was talking about.

There are too many people behaving like Eli’s sons.

Our reading today does include the expanded version of the lectionary text so that we are made witness to Eli being held accountable for failing to “restrain” his sons (1 Sam. 3:13). This serves as a sober reminder that sins of omission (“we have left undone those things which we ought to have done”) are as evil as sins of commission. To be clear, by failing to name evil as evil we essentially bless it as good.

We are witness to a time of racial reckoning. We honor Dr. King by calling out the injustice that we see all around us. When we hear people who claim to be “colorblind” or “not racist” we must call them out on this. Those kind of statements reflect a theology of glory. We are not being honest about what is happening in our nation today. We must call out the evil of racism and the way that it has shaped our nation. This is not the way of God in the world. We belong to a predominantly white denomination; it is especially important for us to name the evil of racism that still deforms us. Dr. King’s witness is every bit as much needed now as it was in his own day. We only need to listen to his words from yesterday to understand the truth they hold for us right now.

The voice of George Floyd won’t stop ringing in my ears. “Mama.” And that wasn’t the first voice to call out and sadly it hasn’t been the last. How do we hear these words in the light of what happened at the U.S. Capitol building last week? An insurrectionist mob sought to achieve vigilante justice in the face of what they falsely

deem to be electoral fraud. We face deception everywhere we look. What are we going to do about it? Will we not ask ourselves whether we have been theologians of the cross or theologians of glory? “The word of God given to Samuel in the story of his calling conveys a divine vocation of calling a thing what it is.”³

Are our ears tingling yet? With excitement or fear? There is so much to be afraid of today: the pandemic, which now includes a more contagious strand, threats of violence in every state capital today until Wednesday, the sight of the National Guard sleeping in our Capitol building, isolation and loneliness. I could go on and on. Perhaps what this passage calls us to do is make a choice. Will we go with the tingle of hope or the tingle of fear? Rev. Donna Schaper, the senior pastor at Judson Memorial Baptist Church on Washington Square, suggests that maybe we can have one ear tingle with fear and one ear tingle with hope. In that way we don't have to live up to a standard of perfection that leaves us feeling incapable of being who we should be.

Fear is a legitimate feeling and right now it is also spiritually legitimate. A lot of danger lurks. There are now more armed troops in D.C. than there are in Iraq and Afghanistan combined. Many of our leaders persist in telling lies.

But now, listen with the other ear. Hear what Samuel was reluctant to hear. God is going to do a new thing, which will make both our ears tingle.

Imagine a new world beyond the lies and the despicable behavior of some of our politicians. Imagine a world where life is fair, where you are well, where those you love, love you well, where swords have become art schools and guns have become welcoming centers for the elderly.

³ Op Cit.

Imagine a world of enchantment, where children play safely on their streets, where good public transportation pulls up to take you to a good job where economic obsession is gone and decent salaries for everyone replace it. Imagine a world where health is insured and life is insured. Imagine good things and then believe that they are coming.

For Christmas this year I received an amaryllis. Maybe some of you did, too. For weeks now, the plant has slowly made its way through the soil but no appearance of a flower was visible. Then one morning this past week, I came downstairs and saw, to my delight, the emergence of the beginnings of the flower. Still green, but I could see that the flower was coming. Yesterday, there it was. Not only one flower, but two! Every year that I am given this type of plant, the same thing happens. I begin to think that I have somehow managed to kill another plant until the day when, to my surprise, a flower emerges. Pushing up and out of the soil, reaching out to the window for the light.

There, before my eyes, my hope was realized. It's always a surprise but nonetheless, there those two beautiful red flowers are, reminding me of the possibilities in God's world.

"Hope is the thing with feathers/that perches in the soul/and sings the tune without the words/and never stops at all" wrote Emily Dickenson. The thought of that little bird is comforting to me. In spite of the despair that surrounds us, don't forget the hope within your soul. It is there. If you listen carefully enough, you will hear it. It calls out softly, yearning to be heard over the noise of the clanging cymbals and loud voices of insurrection. Hope. Emmanuel. God IS with us.