

“Here I Am”
Rev. Susan M. Prichard
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I Samuel 3: 1-20

Our story this morning of a young boy who wakes up in the night because he hears a voice calling his name. Listen for and hear God’s word to us in this story.

I Samuel 3: 1-20

A few years ago, Andover Newton Theological School had an advertising campaign to recruit new students. It included an ad that had a lovely blue background with a moonlit tree and the words: “Does God keep you awake at night?”

They’re hope was obviously to get people to think about what it was that kept them awake at night—since we all find ourselves in that situation from time to time—but also to echo this text about Samuel. Is it God talking to us in our dreams that wake us up?

Over the past couple of months we’ve heard a lot about God talking to people in dreams. Mary, Joseph and the Wise Men, all had very specific dreams from God. God’s message was loud and clear. And they responded accordingly.

In this story, the boy Samuel is an apprentice to the priest Eli. In the night, Samuel is called by God. Samuel assumes that it is Eli calling him but it isn’t Eli. So, after Eli explains that it is God calling Samuel responds to God with the words, “Here I am, Lord.” And Samuel becomes a great prophet of God for the people.

If we end the story at verse 10, it’s a nice little story—suitable for any Sunday School class to learn. It teaches us that God can and does call children into God’s service. But the story doesn’t end there. In fact it goes on for two whole books of the Bible. But before all that can happen, Samuel must tell Eli something that he’d rather not. He has to tell Eli that God is about to punish his family.

I’ve told you before, prophets have a lousy job. They have to stand up to power and tell them that God is not happy. Prophets often don’t live very long.

Tomorrow is a day that we recognize someone who stood up to power and told them that God was not happy. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a preacher who could have spent his life peacefully ministering to the people of his congregation. He could have justified his life by saying that he answered God’s call to service by being the best pastor that he could be. But he didn’t. Something was keeping him awake at night—and that something was God.

I don’t need to go into all the details of Martin Luther King’s life. We’ve all heard it. Most of us saw it unfold on the television screens in our homes before our very eyes. We saw the bus boycott. We saw the protest marches. We saw the riots in the streets. We heard the words of hatred shouted by those of power. We saw the results of the bombs in

churches, the crosses burned on the lawns and, ultimately the assassination of Dr. King himself.

But before he died, Martin Luther King gave one of the most profound speeches we've ever heard. He told us that he had a dream. And in that dream someday in our country, people would be judged for who they were and not just by the color of their skin.

These were bold words in that day. They were profound words in that day. He told us that he had been to the mountain of God and that God had allowed him to see the future—and that future was full of hope for all black people. He gave hope to the black and white people who were struggling and marching for justice. But, he angered the power structure of the white South. And he paid the ultimate price of a prophet—he was killed to silence him.

I grew up in the 60's. I marched in my first civil rights demonstration as a youth delegate of the Waterbury Council of Churches in 1963. I grew up learning in church that good church folk had to stand up for those who could not stand up for themselves. William Sloane Coffin, that fiery preacher from Yale, along with many others, rallied my spirit along with many others to the cause of racial justice. Those were turbulent times of change.

We're now in another time of change. So much is being said in the news and by commentators of all kinds about the contrasts and parallels between our time and other times of great change. Yesterday I watched some of the coverage of the Obama Train run from Philadelphia to Washington D.C. Much was made of the close proximity of the date of the Inauguration and that of the holiday recognizing the work of Martin Luther King. Many remarked on Obama's election as the fulfillment of his Dream speech. So many comments were made about President Lincoln's challenges and the ones facing President-Elect Obama. Other comments were made about the depression that President Franklin Roosevelt faced and what might happen this time around.

Even in my seminary class, we're reading a book called, *Obama's Challenge: America's Economic Crisis and the Power of a Transformative Presidency*. Barack Obama hasn't even been sworn in yet as our new President, and the expectations on him are astronomical. The author, Robert Knutter, explains that if Obama is bold enough to do what needs to be done, he could be a great transformative president, like Lincoln (when he freed the slaves and still held the Union together); like Roosevelt (when he pulled the country out of the great depression) and Johnson (when he pushed through Civil Rights legislation). If, however, Obama settles for being liked, he'll squander the great opportunity before him and us.

We are indeed in a time of great change with many opportunities and challenges before us. As people of God, we know that we are not alone. God has been and will be with us as we move through the days ahead. There is great excitement and hope for the future.

Eighteen months ago, I heard Barack Obama speak to the delegates of the United Church of Christ General Synod here in Hartford. His words were not just those of a politician desiring to be elected. In his words, I and others along with me, heard a man of faith; who spoke of hope and of justice. He spoke of a belief that Americans could rally together to rebuild a world based on solid Christian values—where integrity, decency, honesty and fairness would prevail.

Whether or not you voted for our new President, I hope that we can offer him our prayers and support. He is one of us, a member of the United Church of Christ. He is someone who shares our core belief in the goodness of God and the desire to share that goodness with others. He is someone who wants what's best for all of our people. He is someone, who heard God calling him to step out in faith, and to do great things. And he responded with a "Yes, here I am".

God calls each of us into service. Maybe we were called when we were children, as Samuel was—but we didn't understand it was God. Maybe we were called when we were older, maybe in college or young adulthood—but chalked it up to just youthful enthusiasm. Maybe we were called as adults—but felt too busy because of work or family obligations. Maybe you don't remember hearing God's call—and feel left out.

God calls each of us every single day to do something for someone; to some act of kindness, some act of justice, some act of charity. God's call to us may not be as bold or grand as to be a missionary or a prophet. God might not be asking us to change our career or run for public office. God might not be asking us to put ourselves in harm's way protecting another. But whatever God calls us to do is part of God's grand plan.

When you go to bed each night, ask God for a vision of what you can do for God. Listen for God's voice in the night calling your name. And when that happens, be bold enough to say, "Here I Am, Lord," and listen.

Thanks be to God. Amen.