

Epiphany 1, Year B, 011512  
All Saints Episcopal Church

...and if he calls you, you shall say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Good morning!

Last week, our Hebrew scripture reading was from the book of *Genesis*. Today, we have made a leap to the book of *Samuel*, and a little background - a prequel, if you will - is in order so that we will be up to speed.

Hannah was barren - she could not have any children. In her time, this was a disgrace, although her husband loved her and didn't care that she was unable to bear a child. But Hannah did care. She was ashamed. So she turned to *God*. She went to the tent of meeting - the place where *God* resided -- and prayed for help, and *God* heard her prayer.

Eli was the priest on duty in the tent of meeting when Hannah went there to pray. He heard her prayer and announced, "God has granted your petition. You will have a baby." Within the year, Hannah gave birth to a son, Samuel. When she returned the next year to pray, she did the unimaginable: she gave Samuel to *God*, leaving him behind to be raised by Eli. In dedicating Samuel to *God*, Hannah proclaimed: "There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our *God*."

Years later, the man Samuel would anoint Saul and David as kings over Israel. But it was the boy Samuel, only 12 years old, to whom *God* spoke in our lesson today. It was Samuel's first encounter with *God*, who wanted Samuel to deliver a prophecy to his mentor, Eli.

At first, Samuel did not know that it was *God* who was calling him. He thought it was Eli. Finally, Eli realized that it was *God* speaking to Samuel, literally calling his name but calling him to a life of service as well. Samuel accepted the call, which began with the prophecy to Eli. Now Eli's sons were also priests, but they were bad fellows. They abused their power as priests and Eli did not stop them from their abuse. *God*, who is the friend of those who are abused, hungry, oppressed and destitute, would not tolerate it any longer. So *God* sent Samuel to tell Eli that because of the behavior of his sons, the house of Eli would be punished forever.

Being called by God - to do whatever it is that God wants us to do - can be a difficult thing. First of all, like Samuel, it's hard to know that it is God and not someone else who is calling. Then it is hard to figure out what God wants us to do. Not all of us are called to be prophets, of course. There are more ways to serve God than we can count. So we have to listen, like Samuel did.

Listening is hard. It takes concentration. It takes patience. It takes being still sometimes so we can hear even the tiniest of sounds that might bring God's call to us. That's hard to do.

I've been listening this past week. I've been hearing something. Not sure what it is or what it means. I may be wrong. But I think I am supposed to tell you some stories. So here goes:

From kindergarten through 4<sup>th</sup> grade, I went to Episcopal schools in various cities across the South. Then we moved to Sewanee, TN and I began to attend the only elementary school in town - the Sewanee Public School - a public school in, for all intents and purposes, an Episcopal town. It was 1963 and I was nine years old. (I know...many of you weren't even born yet.) One day just before Thanksgiving in that first semester of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, someone came to our classroom and told us all to go outside to the playground. Other classes came outside, too, and soon we began to realize that the entire student body was there.

Finally, some of the teachers came out on the playground, but they stood together in small groups. No one was watching us. No one was telling us to be quiet or to stop hanging on the monkey bars, or to get in line to go back inside. We could tell that they had been crying. I have no sense of how long we were out there before someone came to tell us to go back inside and to sit in the very small auditorium just inside. Then the principle announced that the President - President John Kennedy - had been assassinated. I don't know how they found out. In the olden days of 1963, there were only 3 channels on TV, there was no CNN or FoxNews or anything else that was on 24 hours a day. But somehow they knew. We were sent home for the rest of the day.

Over the next summer, the town of Sewanee decided to desegregate the public school. I don't know how they did that. I was busy swimming and riding my bike and spending the night with friends. In the fall, there were 3 Negro children in my

class. And I heard the 'N' word for the first time from some of my classmates. Their fathers were in the seminary.

The next summer we moved to Nashville. The school I entered in 7<sup>th</sup> grade was still segregated. Neighborhoods were also segregated, but unofficially so. When my family was going to move to another house in town, my father decided to sell the house himself. One day he showed the house to a Negro couple. That night he had several threatening phone calls, people calling him names, threatening him, threatening us. He turned the sale over to a realty company.

At the beginning of April of my sophomore year - 1968 - four of the members of the school chorus (same school, still segregated) and the chorus director, traveled to Memphis to be in some kind of choral competition. I remember being jealous that I didn't get to go. They were there, in Memphis, on the night that Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. I remember being sad. I remember being scared for my friends. I had seen the pictures in Life Magazine - sit-ins at lunch counters, white policemen with dogs straining at their leashes, ready to spring on unarmed, peaceful black and brown men and women with scared looks on their faces. Riots began. My friends got out of Memphis and came back to Nashville as soon as they could.

Just a few short weeks later, in June, Robert Kennedy was assassinated.

After that, a lot of things run together:

Violence escalating

Vietnam

Peace marches

Riots

Stonewall

Four dead in Ohio

My Lai

Four nuns in Central America

Oscar Romero

Harvey Milk

John Lennon

Ronald Reagan

Pope John Paul II

Exxon Valdez

Desert Storm  
Oklahoma City  
Rwanda  
Darfur  
Rodney King  
Matthew Shepard  
Columbine  
Afghanistan  
9-11  
Iraq  
Sadaam Hussein  
Suicide bombings  
Osama Bin Laden  
Caley Anthony  
Virginia Tech  
Fort Hood  
Tucson  
Glen Beck  
Rush Limbaugh  
Congress  
Jerry Sandusky  
Reality TV  
Jonathan Myrick Daniel  
The Klan  
Michael Donald  
Regina Street

You can make your own list.

Last week, we had someone come to clean the house. Since it was my day off, I was at home while she was there - trying to stay out of the way and doing a little work at the same time. The housekeeper is quite a talker. What was supposed to be a couple of hours' work turned into 3½ because we talked so much - or rather, she talked and I said, 'hmmm.' She talked about different kinds of churches, how people act sometimes even though they claim to be good Christians, things like that. (She knows I'm a 'minister' so she brought all that stuff up. People do that with me.)

After that conversation was over, she told me about working in a Good Will store recently. There was a man and his wife who came into the store pretty often. One day she greeted them and asked if she could help them. The man said in an angry voice, "I don't need no help from no \_\_\_\_ (and used the 'N' word)." She never said it as if she thought that she was a victim, but when I heard her story, I felt as if I had been punched in the chest. I felt the force of the word that man called her and it hurt.

She told me that she continued to smile at him; she never walked away in disgust. Every time he came in, she asked if she could help. And every time he said the same thing; and she smiled at him. Until one day. The man and his wife came into the store. She asked if she could help. The man looked at her, and then he said, "Yes, I think you could help me." And he asked a question about something he wanted and after she gave him the answer, he walked away. His wife stood there next to my friend; she turned to her with tears in her eyes and said, "Thank you. Thank you so much."

That story has stayed with me all week. I shouldn't have been surprised that that sort of blatant name-calling happens in 2012. Surely I'm not still that naïve! After all, my 'list' includes people who seem to make a living by name-calling and other kinds of what I think is violent speech. Even the members of Congress seem to be dead set against cooperating with one another. If we cannot have civil conversation with each other, which produces understanding and thus the ability and, hopefully, the desire to live in harmony with one another, then how can we ever hope to have peace - as in the absence of warfare - much less peace - as in shalom, where justice, mercy and peace is available for all God's people?

Tomorrow is the observance of Martin Luther King, Jr's birth. Many of us will have time off from our regular day of school or work. Some of us will not. No matter what we are doing, there is a call for a Day of Service - a time to serve others as God would have us do. Let us answer that call, at least for a moment or two. Let us look and listen for ways that we can help someone else without expecting anything in return. It's possible. I promise it will make you feel good. And maybe there will be at least a short season of peace in God's world.