

January 17, 2021

I Samuel 3:1-10

The boy Samuel was serving God under Eli's direction. This was at a time when the revelation of God was rarely heard or seen. One night Eli was sound asleep (his eyesight was very bad - he could hardly see). It was well before dawn; the sanctuary lamp was still burning. Samuel was still in bed in the Temple of God, where the Chest of God rested.

Then God called out, "Samuel, Samuel!"

Samuel answered, "Yes? I'm here." Then he ran to Eli saying, "I heard you call. Here I am."

Eli said, "I didn't call you. Go back to bed." And so he did.

God called again, "Samuel, Samuel!"

Samuel got up and went to Eli, "I heard you call. Here I am."

Again Eli said, "Son, I didn't call you. Go back to bed." (This all happened before Samuel knew God for himself. It was before the revelation of God had been given to him personally.)

God called again, "Samuel!" - the third time! Yet again Samuel got up and went to Eli, "Yes? I heard you call me. Here I am."

That's when it dawned on Eli that God was calling the boy. So Eli directed Samuel, "Go back and lie down. If the voice calls again, say, 'Speak, God. I'm your servant, ready to listen.'" Samuel returned to his bed.

Then God came and stood before him exactly as before, calling out, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Samuel answered, "Speak. I'm your servant, ready to listen."

For the last few months there has been one thing most people in the world could agree upon: they were all looking forward

to putting the year 2020 behind them. Globally the world dealt with a pandemic, which brought isolation, death, and economic insecurity; racism, which could no longer be bandaged over; and, political unrest, fed by a post-election like no other. So, as January 1, 2021 approached, we, collectively, began to relax and look forward to a new year, a new start, maybe even a do-over.

Wednesday, January 6, 2021, was Epiphany, seen, in Christian tradition, as the day a light goes off and the baby Jesus is recognized as the Christ Child. How appropriate that it was Epiphany when the turmoil in our nation's capital broke the bubble of our wishful thinking of a new-start-new-year and shone a bright light on the culmination of all the unresolved and unfaced realities of 2020.

These are troubling, unsettling, anxiety-inducing times, no doubt. I am uncertain about the future. What I am certain about, though, is the power of God's love, as it has been and is lived out at Amicable Church. God's love is a challenging love. Amicable's living out of God's love has challenged the world around us with a modern creche, populated by the homeless and underpaid essential workers. And we take pride in our rainbow doors, a sign that all are welcome. Our love challenge though is not a "laying down of the gauntlet", "might makes right" challenge. It is a challenge grounded in and empowered by God's love.

You see, God's love is not a romantic or sentimental idea. Dr. King said this about love: "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love." We, you and I, are called into a loving community here at Amicable Church to challenge "everything that stands against love."

While it might be validating for us to hear about the power of love in the face of these very troubling times we live in, there is also a burning question for me: What can I do, here and now, to make a difference, to challenge “everything that stands against love”?

Oh, how I wish I could grab my toolbox and fix things with a hammer and nails. To be honest it is very presumptuous of me to assume I have all the answers or even the insight to fix what appears to be broken. Still, I, and you, can be part of a solution. But, where to begin? After much soul-searching I found the place to start in the gift of this Sunday’s given Hebrew Scripture lectionary reading. It is the story of the boy, Samuel, whose mother had dedicated him to a life of holy service in the temple under the watchful eye of Eli.

Samuel, as you just heard, was sleeping in the temple, when he was awakened by a voice, calling his name. Assuming it was Eli calling, Samuel ran to see what was needed of him. Three times Samuel heard the call; three times he ran to Eli, because he did not know the voice. With the help of Eli, when Samuel was called a fourth time, he answered, “Speak. I’m your servant, ready to listen.”

As the Movement for Black Lives Matter began to command attention last summer, almost immediately there was a revival of the words of Dr. King and a push back to say we had already made great strides in racial relations in our country, we are not racists. Then it seems like something changed. Many whites began to listen seriously to the concerns of the black, brown, indigenous, and LGBTQ communities, historically oppressed minorities. People began to learn about and acknowledge past history:

- The Jim Crow laws developed in the late 1800’s meant to disenfranchise Blacks and now seemingly being renewed.

- The Red Summer of 1919, when white supremacists killed hundreds of blacks in our major cities.
- The 1921 Black Wall Street massacre in Tulsa, Oklahoma.
- The unequal treatment of Black soldiers returning home from military service after World War Two.
- The writings of Fredrick Douglas, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. DuBois, James Baldwin, and many more were being read and quoted.
- And many contemporary black, brown, indigenous authors, examining race relations, are now on best seller lists.

Like Samuel, who did not know God and had to be helped by Eli to recognize God’s voice, all of this history of oppression and these Black and other minority writers had been calling to us for centuries, but we did not, could not, would not listen.

With Eli’s help Samuel tells God: “I’m your servant, ready to listen.” The answer to what I can do, I am finding for myself, is listening. I have been trying to listen to and read articles by minorities; people who historically have been marginalized. Black, brown, indigenous, queer, and non-Christian. Their understandings about the events of the past week, as well as the past year, have been eye-opening for me. Their ability to put these events into historical context, using a history of experience that is not my own, has been very enlightening.

I do not have any answers or plans of action right now, but my listening is preparing me to work in solidarity with others to bring about a future envisioned by and founded on God’s love.

Through the hard work of listening I am certain my understanding will continue to grow; certain too that with love as my compass, God, the giver and sustainer of all life, will guide my feet on paths that leads to “correcting everything that stands against love.”

I pray that all of us might commit ourselves to God, as Samuel did: “I’m your servant, ready to listen.” Amen.