

**2 Epiphany**  
**January 17, 2021**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit. Amen.**

In today's reading from John's gospel, Jesus is beginning to put together an entourage and he calls Philip to join him. Phillip goes and tells Nathanael about Jesus, and Nathanael responds sarcastically with, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth." I guess Nazareth had a bad name for itself ... a tiny, backwater kind of place. Anyhow, Philip invites Nathanael to join him and see for himself what this man Jesus is about. When Jesus sees Nathanael he remarks, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Why the author chose to compose the sentence as a double negative, I don't know. But, basically Jesus is saying, "Now here is an honest Israelite. Here is a truth-teller." I wonder if that is what Jesus noticed in Nathanael ... a truth-teller ... and is that why he invited him into his inner circle.

Telling the truth is not easy. Sometimes people don't want to hear the truth. And, telling the truth to power can get you killed. Just look at Jesus. Or Gandhi. Or Martin Luther King. But sometimes we have no choice but to tell the truth. Sometimes we have to tell the truth because that is what God has called us to do. That is the story in our first reading about Samuel and Eli.

Telling the truth ... an uncomfortable truth ... is the situation in which Samuel finds himself in today's first reading. Not only does Samuel have to tell his mentor and father-figure Eli the bad news, but the bad news comes directly from God. Eli's sons had been blaspheming God, and Eli had done nothing to prevent it. Therefore Eli and his family would have to live with divine retribution for generations to come.

Sometimes these Bible stories seem distant and remote and so we sidestep the fact that they are actually reflections of our own lives. Phrases like 'blaspheming God' and "divine retribution" seems so far from our vocabulary that we ignore their reality. And the stories have a "once-upon-a-time" characteristic about them ... they happen in a world we can only imagine and so they take on a quality of fantasy. Yet, deep in the story is a reality that transcends time and culture ... a tension between the call to truthfulness and the dread of emotional discomfort. The story is about speaking truth to power ... not so much the power out there, but rather the power of fear in our own psyche and soul when speaking the truth to someone ... or some institution ... we respect.

The story of Samuel and Eli is not all that familiar to most people, but it is a twist on a theme of a story that dates to Abraham and Sarah. It is a theme repeated a number of

times in our Holy Scriptures ... a woman who is barren ... who cannot have children ... miraculously conceives and bears a son ... a son that goes on to greatness. In this case the son who is born of this miraculous birth is Samuel ... Samuel who will go on to anoint David as King over all Israel.

On the cover of our bulletin is a graphic of young Samuel sleeping in front of the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant was the vessel containing the stone tablets upon which were written the Ten Commandments. Long before the Temple was built in Jerusalem by King David's son Solomon, the Ark of the Covenant traveled with the nomadic Israelites from place to place. In the time of Samuel the Ark of the Covenant resided at a Temple in Shiloh, in the hill country north of Jerusalem.

The narrative we heard read this morning is from the third chapter of the First Book of Samuel. However, the story actually begins in chapter one with the account of the birth of Samuel. As I mentioned, it is a tale similar to that of Isaac being born to Abraham and Sarah, and John ... as in John the Baptist ... being born to Zechariah and Elizabeth. It is a story of a woman who was barren but who was given the miracle of birth.

Samuel's mother Hannah was one of the two wives of Elkanah. Elkanah's other wife gave birth to a number of children, but because Hannah was barren this woman made Hannah's life miserable because of her inability to bear a child.

So, on an annual pilgrimage to Shiloh with her husband Elkanah, Hannah went to the Temple. She fell on the steps of the Temple in tears as she prayed to God that she might have a child. Eli, who was the priest of the Temple at Shiloh, observed her, but he mistook her sobs and silent prayers as the mutterings of a drunken woman, and he strongly rebuked her. Hannah, not to be undone by the insult, pleaded with Eli, and recognizing his mistake, Eli changed his admonishment to a blessing.

In due time Hannah became pregnant and bore a son. She named him Samuel, meaning "I asked God for him." She dedicated him to God and then, soon after he was weaned, she returned to Shiloh and presented him to Eli so that Samuel might grow up in the Temple and in the presence of God. Thus, Samuel spent his whole childhood as Eli's foster child living in the shadow of the Ark of the Covenant ... the symbol of God's presence.

As Eli ... the priest at Shiloh ... grew older he relinquished his priestly duties to his sons, but his sons were scoundrels and they abused their power and privilege. Eli's sons stole from the Temple coffers, they desecrated the sacrifices that were made to God, and they spent the money designated for widows and orphans on themselves. In response Eli did nothing, and in his silence he basically condoned their blasphemy.

Now, a caveat. Remember, this story is in our Bible ... I did not make it up. So, any similarity to actual contemporary events and persons is purely coincidental.

Anyhow, it is in this setting that we hear today's story about Samuel's calling to confront Eli. The story is full of symbols and metaphors reflecting a reality beyond the particular incident. Phrases like "the word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread" and "Eli's eyesight had begun to grow dim" tell us as much about our own state of being at times in our lives as they do about the setting in ancient Israel. This all happens at the darkest hour before the new light of dawn breaks, and it is Samuel's first direct contact with the LORD that he has served his whole life. He mistakenly thinks it is his mentor Eli who is calling him, when in actuality it is God.

So, I ask this question: "Have we known times in our lives when we have felt like 'the word of the LORD was rare?'" What do we know about people who we have depended upon for guidance who no longer can see the world as we see it? When have we been in the darkest hour of our lives and heard what might be a calling from deep within the most sacred part of our soul to tell the truth? This story may be about Samuel and Eli, but it is also about you and me ... especially during this pandemic that has killed over two million people ... not to mention an attempted overthrow of our democracy encouraged by our president. And, especially on this Sunday before the day honoring the memory and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr..

Fifty-seven years ago the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. came to St. Augustine to tell the truth. Dr. King, like Samuel before him, had heard God speak to him about injustice. The eyes of the world in the United States had "grown dim" to the wrongs that were being perpetrated on people of color. And I am sure that for many Blacks "the word of God seemed rare," and a "vision" of equality was not "widespread." Then, Dr. King responded to a call from God, and he came speaking truth ... truth to power.

This is the first time in over a decade that this church will not have a Sunday evening vespers service dedicated to Dr. King. We have special speakers, outstanding music, and standing room only crowds for our MLK Vespers. Each year we placed photographs of the struggle for racial equality in this city on the walls, along with quotes from Dr. King. Although we cannot meet together for our Sunday morning worship and special MLK Vespers service, I could not let this weekend go by without putting those photos and quotes on the walls again. They will be up this week for anyone who wants to visit this sacred space for prayer or meditation.

The eyes of many in this nation are still dim when it comes to systemic racism. It is clear that a significant number of the violent rioters at our nation's Capitol a week ago were white supremacists. In addition, the contrast between the relatively meager actions of the Capitol Hill police towards the predominately white insurrectionists, and the extremely violent response to the Black Lives Matter protestors following the George Floyd killing this past summer, is striking. Those apologists who are unwilling to acknowledge the blatant racism that still permeates our society are living with "dim" eyes.

I believe that Jesus called Nathanael to join him because he was an “Israelite in whom there was no deceit.” Nathanael was a truth-teller. To take seriously what Jesus took seriously is to tell the truth ... tell the truth to those with whom you are close ... tell the truth to power ... and to tell the truth to yourself in spite of whatever power inside you wants to deny it.

One last thing ... probably more difficult than telling a truth to another is when we have to look in the mirror and tell ourselves the truth. I believe that this tale about God calling Samuel to tell the truth to Eli is also a story that we may know in our own internal world. Often there is an “inner” Eli within us who has guided us through life, but whose offspring have taken charge with self-destructive behavior. There is also an “inner” Samuel who is called by that sacred part of our soul that desires to live in God’s image who wants to tell the truth.

We, too, are a called people. We are called to tell the truth. We are called to tell the truth that brings more light to this world ... especially during this season of Epiphany in which light is so very important. We are called to bring more love into this world. We are called to bring more God into this world. As we take seriously what Jesus took seriously, we will tell the truth. We will tell the truth even when it is an uncomfortable truth. We will tell the truth to ourselves. We will tell the truth to those who are close to us. And, we will tell the truth to the powers of the world when the eyes of the world have grown dim to injustice.

Amen.

Link to St. Augustine Civil Rights era photographs:  
<https://www.crmvet.org/images/imgstaug.htm>

Collect for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Almighty God, by the hand of Moses your servant you led your people out of slavery, and made them free at last: Grant that your church, following the example of your prophet Martin Luther King, may resist oppression in the name of your love, and may strive to secure for all your children the blessed liberty of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.