

Higher Ground
Second Sunday of Epiphany
January 17, 2021
Rev. Patricia Wagner

1 Samuel 3: 3-9

3 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 3 the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. 4 Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!"^[a] and he said, "Here I am!" 5 and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. 6 The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." 7 Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. 8 The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. 9 Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10 Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. April 3, 1968

"The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." begins the Story of Samuel.

Pillars of smoke and fire, parting of seas those days were done, the word of the Lord was rare, visions were not widespread

Even in the house of the LORD, like the temple where Samuel, a temple boy, and Eli, the blind priest (whose name means "my God") were sleeping.

It is only the young Samuel whose sleep is disturbed. Isn't that interesting, that it is the youth who are restless, and the long inhabitant of the temple sleeps on.

Perhaps you've known that restlessness. You've being stirred awake perhaps night after night, until you realize that it is the Lord who is speaking.

Tell the Lord, "Your servant is listening," says, Eli, who had lost his own favor with God because he did not reign in his sons. Eli knows the import of this moment: *The word of the Lord was rare in those days, visions were not widespread.*

These days, too, real vision, compelling, godly vision is rare.

Maybe that's why we hold so fast to our prophets, and to the final sermon of Dr. King, for he had been given a vision.

I've been to the mountaintop. My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord...

Martin been awakened by God as a young man, and at 39, had found his feet, his mind, his heart, planted on higher ground than most of the rest of us.

He'd been given a perspective, a sense of God's own vision, that the rest of us just don't, can't, will not see.

Perhaps God gave him this because he had sacrificed so much. Led him to the mountaintop and helped him see the Lord's own hope fulfilled, only 22 hours from death. *I'm not worried about that now because I have seen the promised land.*

And that vision, that promised land, was, is not one of the supremacy of any one tribe or group, party or class, but glorious freedom, freedom from our blindness, from the shackles of our ideologies, freedom to love one another as we are loved by God.

That's what Martin said he could see from the mountaintop, from higher ground.

The word of the Lord was rare in those days. Visions were not widespread.

Without a vision, the people perish, says the proverb. A vision that keeps waking us up, one by one, little by little, a voice that calls our true name.

A voice of one who also hears us. You know what *Sa-mu-el* means? God has heard!

God is not deaf to our cries, to our tears, to our confusion and pain, to our clamor and rancor, to the shouting in the streets.

That hearing God is calling to us, inviting us to be lifted up to a higher place.

And we all need that, every one of us,

That higher place is not one beyond suffering. It was not for Martin. It was not for Jesus.

God awakens us, calls us by name, offers us a vision from the mountaintop to restore us, direct us to bring its fulfillment.

Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven

I have been thinking about Rube Bailey, long time part of the church, who is in his last hours. And of a dear young friend of mine, son of church members, who is in the hospital right now from a sudden and serious condition and his life is very much in jeopardy.

I prayed for him through the night, pushed away the thought of death, but still pondered how upon the moment of our death we get lifted up out of these bodies but also these old warrior minds of that moment when we will realize all we could not, would not see.

The word of the Lord was rare those days visions were not widespread.

I hope you have someone to share the word that comes to you on restlessness nights; how you are being awakened, the epiphanies that keep coming, the shifts in your consciousness, identity, landscape and vision.

I hope this leadership team shares such things this year, and that small groups, and classes and families and youth members, those who know us online will do so, too.

We offer our vision, our epiphanies, our shifts in consciousness, identity, and vision, so this congregation, this community, this country can begin to see, and see one another from the mountaintop, that we may each say to the Lord: *Speak, for your servant is listening.*

For our offertory, we are going to hear a hymn written in 1898 by a Methodist Episcopal preacher's son. It took off and has been sung now for over 100 years. A vision for which we all long:

Higher Ground

I'm pressing on the upward way,

New heights I'm gaining every day;

Still praying as I'm onward bound,

"Lord, plant my feet on higher ground."

May this be our prayer.

Amen.