

Here We Are

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC

January 17, 2021

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Text: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

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; <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>Then the Lord called, 'Samuel! Samuel!' and he said, 'Here I am!' <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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.' <sup>7</sup>Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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.'

Prayer

Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be always acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Sermon

10 Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'

There is more to the call of Samuel -

He listened to God speak,

And God called him to hard work.

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening, Samuel said, and

<sup>11</sup>Then the Lord said to Samuel, 'See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.'"

Samuel was called to bold and challenging work in ancient Israel.

He was called to renew Israel.

He was called to speak a prophetic word to the people;

Called to hold his mentor Eli to accountability,

Called to lead the people even when they wanted a flashy king (1 Samuel 7-8)- he was called to guide them to a just way of living & worshipping God.

God's call to Samuel was a call to do hard things.

To answer God's call required Samuel to be bold and brave.

Now, Samuel was a bold and brave young man, you can tell by the way he answered the first time he heard that voice calling his name. Samuel, Samuel. Here I am! The Hebrew here is *hineni*. I turn to rabbinic colleagues to get the subtlety of the Hebrew.

Rabbi Marc Katz says, "The Bible is full of accounts where God calls out to humans, asking for attention, love, readiness, and faith. But only four times is God greeted with the alacrity of *hineini*. Only four times is someone willing enough to be radically open to the call. When someone like Samuel says *hineini*, he is really saying, "Yes. I am ready for what is to come, my whole self, fully present in what is next."<sup>1</sup>

There's another piece to *hineni*, here I am: It's a willingness to do something challenging.

Now as I've perhaps mentioned too many times in the last few weeks, we're in a worship series on our call as individual people of faith, and the call of our congregation in this season and in the post-Covid time. On Epiphany we talked about listening for God's call and coming to epiphanies in faith. Last week we talked about testing the spirits of a call - discerning what is right and wrong and whether a call is aligned with God's will. Is it God, or are you talking to yourself? Thematically we're out of order today because Samuel models for us the spirit of receptivity to calling. *Hineni* comes

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<sup>1</sup> <https://cbebk.org/rabbi-marc-katzs-mlk-sermon-at-all-saints-church/>

before discernment, in other words. The boldness with which we jump into action, the courage that helps us respond to a call to make our world better - we learn about that from Samuel.

We learn courage and boldness from Samuel but we learn it also from the prophets of our time.

There was a meeting one day in December 1955. The Montgomery bus boycott was being organized and the Montgomery Improvement Association had its first meeting in the basement of a church, Dexter Avenue Baptist. Their preacher was 26 and had been there a year but he was asked by the group to be its first president and to speak that night. Martin Luther King, Jr. got a call to leadership that day. "King inspired not just his listeners that day. He inspired himself. He must have realized, when he stepped down from the pulpit, that he had found his calling. And, for the remaining twelve years and four months of his life, he was loyal to it."<sup>2</sup> Again and again, when called he responded, Here I am!

I am cognizant of the plea of Dr. King's daughter to those of us who would speak of him this weekend. Bernice King asked us to: "remember that he was resolute about eradicating racism, poverty & militarism & believed that the church should lead in that work. 'We will be the participants in making it so!'"<sup>3</sup> It seems to me that Dr. King was bold and brave in his prophetic witness, no matter how hard it was, to the very last day of his life when he was advocating for economic justice and standing with sanitation workers in Memphis. His work against racism and poverty laid bare systemic injustices in this country that we still wrestle with. His work is not done, he did not begin it, and it was never just his work. Indeed the need for brave and bold work for racial justice, brave and bold work to eliminate poverty and economic inequality, that brave and bold work is really only beginning and it is our common calling as Christians.

There's more than one Pilgrim that we could point to, doing this crucial, difficult, brave and bold work. But this weekend I am thinking of a particular one. Before I arrived here, I had the honor of knowing this Pilgrim, just a bit, through wider UCC work. She was your ambassador in our conference, and a brave and bold force for racial justice and women's empowerment. Sylvia Ferrell-Jones passed away a few years ago but her

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/when-martin-luther-king-jr-became-a-leader>

<sup>3</sup>

<https://publish.twitter.com/?query=https%3A%2F%2Ftwitter.com%2FBerniceKing%2Fstatus%2F1350260342832640009&widget=Tweet>

hard work and prophetic witness live on. And this week, the Association of Black Citizens of Lexington has included her in its Black History Project Banner program. Sylvia's banner is near Cary Hall. The remembrances offered by Sal Jones and Beth Chandler on Thursday evening were amazing - as soon as the recording is available I will send the link out - and they reminded me of her dauntless spirit. We can say with confidence that when she sensed a call to serve, her response was, Hineni. Here I am.

Here's the thing. You don't have to be a Samuel or an MLK or an SFJ to answer God's call. What you need is a willing spirit, enthusiasm, imagination, and maybe a little bit of pluck. Dr. King actually preached that we should be cautious when we think that we're great leaders - "It's a kind of drum major instinct—a desire to be out front, a desire to lead the parade, a desire to be first." He went on to preach that Jesus would want us not to be first in prominence but instead: "But I want you to be first in love. (Amen) I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity. That is what I want you to do."<sup>4</sup> King applied this ideal to be first in love, moral excellence, generosity - not just to individuals but to us corporately and to the United States. I am struck this weekend that surely there are things every single one of us is called to do in this time - and there is work that we are called to as a church, and there is work we are called to as a country. For the US it the work of accountability for the destructive discourse and racialized violence of the last few years - the work that Dr. King spoke of and that has never been completed. For churches like ours, part of our call is to model beloved community, inclusivity, generosity, and prophetic witness. We are indeed called to do hard things for the sake of our neighbors and our community, to be brave and bold,

To say with Samuel and the prophets who have forged the path before us:

Here we are.

Speak, Lord, for your Servants are listening.

Here we are. We will be brave and bold.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/drum-major-instinct-sermon-delivered-ebenezer-baptist-church>