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2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Year B  
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**SPEAK!**  
**1 SAMUEL 3:1-20**

For the past week, I have been thinking about life and death, faith and life, Presbyterian Peacemaking, the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the inauguration of Barack Hussein Obama as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America and the story of Samuel and Eli.

And remember: I was on a fourth grade trip to Disney World! I understand what it means to be sleep-deprived; I appreciate that complexity of intergenerational group dynamics, but unlike Samuel, I am not sure that I can say that “none of my words fell to the ground.”

The story of God’s call to Samuel is near and dear to me. When Lydia was “this big,” she would sit on my lap while I read the *First Steps Toddler Bible* to her. The artwork was/is engaging (no blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jews here), and the rhythm of the language was/is captivating, even for adults. The storytelling thrives on repetition, as does the story of Samuel and Eli.

Samuel and Eli’s story has an Abbott and Costello “Who’s on first?” quality. Samuel awakens to Lord speaking and confuses it with Eli’s. Samuel presents himself, saying, “Here I am!” And Eli is confused (apparently, confusion is contagious), as he explains, “uh, Samuel, I did not call; lie down again.” Samuel does, only to return again and again. At last, Eli has an “aha” moment that enables him to sleep and Samuel to listen. Eli imparts to Samuel a Call to Worship: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening...”

By the time that Samuel appeared in Eli’s bedroom the third time, Lydia would be laughing hysterically. I assumed that she was laughing at Samuel’s cluelessness, as was I, but as I have visited and

revisited this story, it seems to me that Eli may be even more clueless than Samuel. Eli comes off looking better in the *First Steps Toddler* Bible than he does in the Hebrew Scriptures. Then again, so does Samuel. So does Israel.

Scripture states matter-of-factly that, “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” Israel lacks vision, and Eli does, too. His sight dims both literally and perhaps metaphorically, but, to quote 1 Samuel, “the lamp of God had not yet gone out.”

Please resist the urge to hear “the lamp of God” as self-referential, as words written on a page, as in, “Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.” This lamp is above and beyond the face of the earth. It is natural, mysterious and ever-illuminating. It serves as a reminder of God’s promise to Noah, to Israel, to you and to me. This is why the sentence concludes with, “Samuel....lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was.”

Lying in the temple, Samuel is bold to pray, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” Lying in the temple, he empties himself and is able to listen. He is able to hear the Lord when she says, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle.”

The rhetoric here goes from ear-tingling to spine-tingling, as the Lord proclaims, “On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end.” “Fulfill against”: Is it just me or is this language unusual yet utterly terrifying, especially when one considers who will be doing the fulfilling?

Eli will be “fulfilled against” because he knows. He knows the iniquities of his people. He knows that his sons (and presumably daughters) are blaspheming God. He knows, and he does nothing to deter them. To do nothing is to do something; it is to promote the status quo. In this place at this time, the status quo results in God swearing to the house of Eli that “the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.”

But how can this be? Eli has been ordained and installed. He knows all of the liturgies provided by the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program for Race Relations Sunday. He voted for Obama. For him, sacrifice and offering are more than rituals; they are art forms...with which God is disgusted.

One of the Scripture readings that the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program suggested for today is the familiar one from Amos in which “justice roll(s) down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” We prayed for this justice and righteousness as we confessed our sin and will recommit ourselves to their pursuits in response to the Word proclaimed.

What may not have been obvious as we prayed this prayer is that all of it is written in Amos. God hates. God despises our festivals, our solemn assemblies. God “does not look upon”---God ignores---the noise of our songs and the melodies of harps in the absence of righteousness and justice. This justice belongs to God. This righteousness is not self-righteousness, and this justice is communal, political and social. Otherwise, any one of us would be crushed under the weight of God’s justice.

God seems to be saying the same thing in 1 Samuel when the Lord proclaims “the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering,” and I suspect that Eli knows this on some level or he would not be asking Samuel, “What was it that the Lord told you?” This is a tough question, so tough that Samuel may be tempted to lie. Oh, the economy will bounce back in the first hundred days...

But Samuel steps up in the face of adversity and says, “Israel, we have a problem. Justice is not rolling down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” The rivers are damned, and the streams are polluted. The truth is nowhere to be found, and truthfulness is the lifeblood of prophetic work. What evidence supports Samuel’s claim that God is speaking to him? All Israel from Dan to Beersheba knows that Samuel is a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

Israel has lost its prophetic edge, because it has been lost in the pomp and circumstance of its own pride and pageantry. Sound familiar? The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said this about the United States: “A nation that continues to spend more money on military defense than on programs of

social uplift is approaching spiritual doom.” Now why hasn’t this quotation appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*?

Be wary of commentary that suggests that Barack Obama’s election fulfills Martin Luther King’s dream, because: (1) the dream does not belong to God before it belonged to King; and (2) the civil rights movement is incomplete. Yes, there is progress to celebrate, but civil rights are lagging and rights for *all* human beings lag even further behind. Until I can go to a barber shop in Tuscaloosa on the morning after an Obama is elected President and not hear racist jokes, civil rights are lagging. Racial discrimination is alive and well in Alabama and throughout the world. For any of us to assume otherwise is sinful; it is to blaspheme God.

With Obama’s inaugural address only 48 hours away, speculation builds. What will he say? Who will pray? Who will bless? And what will they say? Rick Warren was unacceptable to some (though his position on gay marriage is similar to Obama’s). Now Episcopal bishop Eugene Robinson is involved. The fact that Joseph Lowery is the only the clergy member whose leadership has not sparked controversy is a mark of progress.

The events of the past year have reminded us of the power of being truthful, that it is possible to be elected President of the United States using words like “sacrifice.” We have been reminded of the power of speech, of how words articulate vision and give hope. Now the question is, “How will we live into this vision?”

Prophets speak, and it is incumbent upon the people to listen. The first word that is spoken belongs to God, and it is incumbent on the prophets to remember this. Speak, Lord, your servant is listening. How brash! How bold! To speak an imperative to God, and yet in the story of Samuel and Eli, this imperative is a response to God’s call to Samuel. It is an awe-inspiring and all-consuming prayer that, when prayed faithfully, inches us toward justice and righteousness that is nothing less than a gift revealed most clearly in God’s grace toward us in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

To Jesus Christ, who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood and made us to be his body, priests and priestesses of his God and Parent, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.

Amen.