

Listening for God
Epiphany III
January 24, 2021
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
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May the One from whom we come – who is Light, and Peace, and Love – lead us home to the true Kingdom. Amen.

Happy Third Sunday after the Epiphany! Here we are at the very midpoint of Epiphanytide, this season of vocation. This is the season when our readings from Scripture week by week focus on how God speaks, and prompts, and calls human beings to join God in “doing the right thing” and helping to bring about the Kingdom.

And how surprising, strange and varied are God’s ways of speaking and calling, and prompting. Think of the Magi who inaugurated Epiphanytide on that fateful date of January 6th, just a few weeks ago. Who would expect God to speak and act through pagan nonbelievers, star-gazing astrologers? But there God is, at work through them, and they follow God’s prompt in a dream, as that reading from scripture says, by taking a new and different road home. Perhaps God is calling you that way too? In your dreams? To take a new road in this new year? To find a new place, a new job, a new relationship, a new commitment that feels more like home than any you’ve known before?

Or what about the baptism of Jesus? The voice of God over the water. Do you hear God speaking to you through the natural world? Along the Charles? At Crane’s Beach? At Jamaica Pond? Prompting you to realize how beloved you are, simply because the beauty of the natural world is a given, given for you, not because of anything you did to deserve it, but simply because you – along with all of God’s other creatures – are beloved of God, the God who wants to bathe you, baptize you in beauty.

Or perhaps you are hearing God speak to you, countering the snide voice of some Nathaniel in your life. Nathaniel who last week, cut his eyes when Philip told him he had found God through a man from Nazareth with the memorable remark, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Or West Virginia – where I’m from? Or Roxbury? Or from your modest apartment? And you simply hear a voice saying “Come and see.” Come and see what wonders God can bring out of Nazareth...or West Virginia...or Roxbury...or your modest apartment.

How do you imagine God would speak up and inaugurate a movement? If you imagined how God might speak up and call you to “do the right thing,” and cooperate in bringing about the Kingdom of God, how would you imagine God would go about it?

I imagine many of us think God would wait for the most opportune moment, perhaps looking for the signs of the times to indicate a swell of support for moving in that propitious direction. Maybe God would even hold focus groups, building up support for the kingdom by painting a winning picture of all the benefits that would accrue from being part of this exciting, game-changing moment. “Now is just the right time for this! Can’t you see it? A world remade? And you, you’ll get to be part of this from the ground floor, investing from very first! Just think what that will mean for you!”

But that’s not how God works. And that’s not the kind of God-on-the-move that Jesus waits for. Not only does he not wait for what in the world’s eyes would seem like the most opportune moment...; he makes his move at what to most eyes would like the worst possible time. His predecessor, John the Baptist, the first preacher of the kingdom, has – as today’s reading from Mark’s Gospel makes clear – just been arrested. And though today’s reading doesn’t say so, we know where this is headed, so to speak. John is not just arrested and in prison. He will soon be ushered into King Herod’s dinner party, as a beheaded, horribly executed criminal: his head displayed on a platter as a macabre sort of party-favor for the whim of the king’s stepdaughter. Could there ever have been a clearer warning than this is not an opportune moment to inaugurate the Kingdom...that you do not want to follow in the footsteps of John?

But the divine summons to vocation is often not what we expect. Cecil B. DeMille, good Episcopalian though he was, has forever ruined many folks’ expectations about how God calls, and what to expect about how God gets our attention. Who can forget the laser-like drama of the finger of God incising the words of the law on the tablets of stone in The Ten Commandments? But rarely, if ever, is the summons from God issued so dramatically, in gorgeous technicolor, with stirring music that makes the heart beat faster.

What's more, I think many of us fearfully assume that God's summons are always to "large tasks," and demand a dramatic leaving behind of one way of life for a heroic commitment to a life that is vastly different. And it may be that one particular way of reading today's Gospel contributes to that kind of fearful assumption about call. Jesus seems to come out of nowhere, interrupting the bucolic lives of these four fishermen, and calling them to "Follow." Because the compressed story gives us no "cartoon bubbles" to clue us into what the two pairs of brothers are thinking and feeling, it seems they immediately drop everything and unquestioningly obey his command. Scary stuff for those of us who weigh every decision with endless musings and "what ifs."

I remember a woman - a 30-something wife and mother of 2 boys - in the parish where I served right out of seminary coming up to me after a service and saying that she had always been afraid to listen to God very closely, for fear God would ask her to leave her present life behind to go serve in a difficult setting in a far-off land. I suspect she was not alone in being afraid to listen, really listen openly to God, because of just such a fear. Perhaps you know what it is like to have your fears block your ears, deafening you to hearing God speak, or whisper to you. But I imagine that the call of God comes right in the midst of where we are, even in the midst of the fears that make us want to stuff our ears and hum loudly: la-la-la-la-la! The call to vocation, to doing the will and work of God, almost always comes amidst the everydayness of life, just as it did with the fishermen brothers Jesus called.

God can speak through a quiet whisper in your heart, prompting you to call someone you need to reconcile with. The divine voice can speak while you're listening to the news, as you find yourself thinking: "I have to take some small step, and do my small part to combat racism...or environmental degradation...or some other social ill." You may be surprised to receive an unlooked for gift, as you hear an inner voice saying the thing you least expected to hear: "You're fine just the way you are...and I love you," contradicting the endless loop of self-attacks and self-doubts that have been plaguing you. God can speak in the middle of the night, when worries interrupt your sleep, and you get up to make a cup of coffee.

That's the way it was for one whom God called to help inaugurate the Kingdom. It was the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott. ** Rosa Parks had just been hauled in by the police for her courage on the bus. And in this seemingly inauspicious moment, not unlike the time just after the arrest of John the Baptist, a man emerged who heard the voice of God calling. Like Jesus, he was young, in his mid-20s. He found himself called to take on racism and injustice and violence, and not unlike Jesus, in a spirit of courageous non-violence.

Or at least it seemed he was courageous. What we know now is that he started out as a reluctant prophet. Yes, he wanted to work for non-violent change. But he did not desire the spotlight of prominent leadership. Not unlike the Lord he followed, who had cautioned his disciples not to proclaim his messianic status, King did not hear God calling him into the spotlight, despite the pressure from his followers to take up the mantle of public prominence.

But pressures mounted. The bus boycott, which all had assumed would be short-lived, dragged on for weeks, and then months. And then the death threats began. "Call off the boycott or die." Towards the end, as many as 40 such phone calls came in every day. And on one occasion, when the police had hauled Martin into jail for speeding, in the clutches of the police at last, he imagined himself on the threshold of being lynched. Fear descended like a fog.

King's fears, and his wondering about the will of God, reached an apex late Friday night, Jan. 27, 1956. Martin trudged home, after another grueling strategy session, and found Coretta asleep. He paced about, his nerves, his entire soul on edge. And then the phone rang, a sneering voice on the other end: "Leave Montgomery immediately if you have no wish to die." His fears flooded him; he hung up the phone, walked to his kitchen, where, his hands trembling, he put on a pot of coffee and slumped into a chair at his kitchen table.

Later, in his stirring book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, Martin described what happened next.

I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.

The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side

forever." Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything."

Three days later a bomb tore apart his house and Martin's family escaped harm by a hairsbreadth. "Strangely enough," King later wrote, "I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My religious experience a few nights before had given me the strength to face it."

When news of the bombing spread, a crowd, and then an angry mob gathered, fists tightly clenched, ready for battle. As they pressed up against King's ruined house, they shouted for vengeance. Martin climbed up on the broken porch and raised his hands. "We must meet hate with love. Remember, if I am stopped, this movement will not stop because God is with this movement. Go home with this glorious faith and radiant assurance." His short, but pointed homily over, the crowd dissipated, their rage defused and their souls fed with King's message of Gospel non-violence.

More than a decade later, King spoke of his epiphany in the kitchen. "It seemed at that moment, I could hear an inner voice saying to me, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world.' I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone."

God's call in the fearful night in the kitchen, and beyond, strengthened King and in turn, Martin's courageous and keen listening for the call of God, strengthens us. "Stand up for justice, stand up for truth, stand up for peace. And I will be at your side forever."

That message was spoken to King, but it is a message surely for all of us in this winter of discontent and new hope. King staked his life on the call of God, as he listened to the divine voice speak quietly within in his kitchen in that January 65 years ago. Surely he heard, because he listened. Surely he was able to sense his vocation because he listened, even in the midst of his fears in that perilous time.

And just as Martin heard the quiet but sure voice of God within, you and I can too. He did not know all the good that would come from his listening, good for his people, good for us all. Nor can we know what good will come as we listen for the voice of God in this January, good for us, good for Trinity, good for America and the world. But of one thing we can be sure. If we listen, we will hear the One who Is Light, and Peace, and Love call to us, as God called to Martin, to "Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you..., and never leave you alone." Amen.

** I am grateful to Father John Dear for the ways in which an eloquent article of his summarized Martin Luther King, Jr.'s epiphany in the kitchen.