“Your Servant is Listening”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wasn’t always a devout Christian. Raised in a Baptist household, he was, in fact, pretty adamant in contradicting several basic tenets of Christian belief. For King, his initial reason for going to seminary was that he wanted to answer "an inner urge to serve humanity." I want to let that sit for a bit, and we will hear more about King later.

Samuel … Philip and Nathaniel … what makes them say yes? What makes us say yes . . . to anything? What makes someone say yes to a whole-life, whole-body change that asks them, in fact, to live into this change so fully that their very souls are changed, and their bodies potentially endangered. I wonder if, at root, we all are waiting to be asked to make such a change. Although I say, “I wonder,” I am pretty certain it is true that as we go through the business of our days, there is a sense that a question *is* being asked, to which the answer is always “yes, Lord, I will follow.”

The questions, we can be sure, are myriad: For some, it may be a longing for greater spiritual or emotional health. It may start in the morning when one wakes for the day and asks for the energy necessary to greet it. For some, that same wake-up call may be more physical, in which one prays that a physical ailment would subside so that pain or discomfort could be replaced by expectations of achievement. Maybe for some it is niggling doubts about a purpose, in which one knows there is simply more to life than earning a living, or providing the most basic physical needs. What do we do for our most basic spiritual needs, and how do we foster the growth of abundant spiritual life, even as much as we strive toward more abundant physical gains. It may be that we have been *wondering* about this on our own for so long, that we forget we don’t always have to do so. Sometimes what *calls* us to make a significant change to a deeper spiritual life is someone else, and in that other person we may hear the voice of God. Sometimes, too, there are simply persons placed in our paths to point us more directly to God, or to help us listen for God’s voice more clearly. For Samuel, we have Eli. For Nathaniel, Philip. For me, so many people, and a final nudge from a woman named Ginny Evans, who was the interim minister at the church I first joined in Massachusetts. For Martin Luther King, Jr.? Morehouse president Benjamin E Hays. Maybe you can name the person who most influences you to follow your heart, to follow your faith—the thing that makes you want to head to church, and perhaps gives you “an inner urge to serve humanity” that King first responded to. For me, I find increasingly that God is showing up in coincidences upon coincidences, and find myself regularly quoting Einstein, as he pronounced that “Coincidences are God’s way of remaining anonymous.”

What calls you may not look like ministry in a church setting. I’m sure it isn’t this for everyone, or we’d be in a funny kind of predicament. Our call from God may be, as it was for Samuel, to be a prophetic voice, even when he knew that the word he was being called to share with the people would not be welcome news. I struggle with this sometimes, myself. There are times when the news of the world is received in very different ways by people who share faith in our loving God and in Christ, Jesus. This same God, who has known us and been with us at all times in our life, has been with each person on this wide globe at all times in each life. That is astounding, isn’t it? God created and loves each person. The same God who forgives us our sins offers that same forgiveness to all who repent.

Have you all been pondering this same idea for a while now? Do you wonder whether, in fact, Jesus’ saving act on the cross was meant for everyone, as he himself stated? What, then, do we think about those who do not believe just as we do? What, then, do we do with those who do not look like us? What, then, do we understand about those who do not live as we do? Often, lately, the voice of God to me, asking for prophetic voice, has been in response to the things in this life that frighten us, and to respond is not easy. I think of Samuel who, immediately after responding to God, with “your servant is listening,” is asked to prophesy punishment to Eli’s family. From the depth of his own faithfulness, Eli prompts Samuel—the young boy—to speak any of the words he has been given to share, and so Samuel responds as faithfully with the news of punishment for the family’s sins.

*I am so very glad I have not been called this morning to tell you about your punishment.* Aren’t you? As I have been reading this week a lot about Dr. King and his work, musing about what I will call his martyrdom, I find myself reflecting on how very far we have to go in this country—in this community—to have the depth of equality that he sought and struggled to achieve. During Advent, in thinking of making the rough places plain, I had reason to ponder the need for radical leveling of the rough places before Jesus might walk easily across the racial divides in this country. This is so true in 2024, even as it was true in 1965, and in 1865 when the Civil War ended. To acknowledge that racism exists in this country in insidious and in systemic ways is difficult for many people. To acknowledge that racism may exist *in us* in ways that we will not understand unless we are willing to entertain the question--this is difficult for many of us. When things are difficult, though, we are called by God to turn toward them in love; not to turn away in fear, distrust or anger. When things are difficult we are called by God to turn toward them in love; not to turn away in fear, distrust or anger.

I pray that we may, in love, speak of our fears and our overall concerns in a way that responds to God’s call to us. Where and how is God calling you? Do we listen to the voice of Jesus, who asks us to love above all? Do we listen to the voice of Jesus, who asks us to turn the other cheek and to pray for those who persecute us? Do we listen instead to the voices that would ask us to fear first and to love when it is convenient or easy?

 What is the incipient call you are hearing to grow your spiritual life—with your feet and your hands? My guess is that it is a voice far louder than a whisper, which speaks that our spiritual lives grow when we open our hearts in love. Can you hear it?