

**A Sermon by Rev. Martha Shiverick
Oh, To Be Like Samuel!
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
January 18, 2009
Text: 1 Samuel 3: 1-10**

My step father who is 90 years old flew to Cleveland from Florida this past Thursday in the very, very cold weather because his son's, my step brother's company was one of Obama's stops on the way to Washington DC. Although quite an exhausting trip for someone of my step-father's age to make for an overnight, he did it without questioning. He was going to meet President Elect Obama. He and his son were going to have their picture taken with the next president. He was going to BE with the first African American president in our country's history. He was shaking hands with history! That, he felt, was making it the trip of a lifetime.

On NPR last week there was a show about people's stories of going to DC this week for the Inauguration and all the festivities. They were discussing the lengths people were going to get tickets to the inauguration, the parade, the balls and other events. People were paying outrageous prices for hotel rooms, sharing floor space in apartments, and one young man called in saying that he had rented out his parents condo for thousands of dollars. (I hope he has told his parents by now!) You probably have stories of friends who have gotten tickets and will be there and others who have tried and failed. Airlines and trains have been sold out since the election and cars will not be allowed into the city. They are expecting it to be the largest crowd ever to attend an inauguration. And there is no question why everyone wants to be in DC on Tuesday. Whether you voted for Obama or not, it is exciting that we are living history. From now on this will be one of those dates people will ask us about in the years to come. What did you do during Obama's inauguration? Where were you when you watched him take his oath of office?

And what a week this is! We celebrate the heritage of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. today and tomorrow, and then experience the outcome of such a heritage on Tuesday with Barack Obama becoming our president. We are living a part of history! This will definitely be a new chapter in our history books! It makes me feel humble that so

many people worked so hard to make a day like this happen. It makes me realize that it is individuals with a vision that can change the world for the better. God calls prophets to do this work and it is through that work that we bring God's realm, God's kingdom to earth. It is the calling of the prophet and the follower of God.

This morning's text is the story of the calling of a prophet. It is the call from God to the prophet Samuel. It happens in an era where there are many problems within Israel. There is much corruption within the Israelites and even Eli's sons' are corrupt and not able to lead like their father. God seemed distant to the people and messages from God were not frequent. There was social upheaval the people were corrupt. Life was unsettling and not secure. It was a time of political danger as the Philistines were threatening their very survival. It is at this time that God calls the boy Samuel as his prophet to speak his word to the people of Israel. Listen now for God's word in the telling of the story found in 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. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 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. Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." 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." Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. 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. 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.

Now the Lord came and stood there calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

WOW! We will get to Samuel's response to God later but let's first think about the call itself. The writer of Samuel wants us to understand that this happened at a time when God's word was rare and people's visions were uncommon. What we have here is a report of God's very infrequent appearances in the human world.

The call from God happens at night. It happens, according to the writer, as Samuel slept in the temple near the ark of the Lord and his old teacher slept outside in his own area. The event happened before dawn, before the oil lamp had gone out since priestly protocol called for the burning of lamps in the sanctuary from evening to morning.

Theologian Robert Polzin writes that this whole reference to the lamp is important in understanding the story and the characters as it is also a description of them. The account of Samuel's calling mixes sight and insight. We know that VISIONS are infrequent and also that Eli's eyesight is growing dim. However the writer says the lamp has not yet gone out. Clearly visions might be infrequent, but they still do happen and even though Eli is losing his sight, he still has the insight to recognize God's calling to Samuel. The ironic twist and humor is that the boy Samuel who sleeps inside the Temple next to the Ark of God in which houses God's word can not understand that the voice calling him is from God, whereas the old, blind man sleeping outside the temple perceives the divine presence calling Samuel.

God is very patient with Samuel. God calls him three times and each time Samuel goes to Eli and asks what her wants. Eli does not recognize it as being God calling to Samuel either and tells him to go back to bed. Imagine what you would think if you heard God's voice at night calling to you. Would you assume it was a dream? Would you assume it was a friend playing a trick on you? We would of course dismiss it as it is outside our reality and experience. And Samuel and Eli did the same. Words and visions of God are rare, and Samuel and Eli had no basis to recognize it as God's call.

When Samuel goes to Eli the third time, Eli recognizes what is taking place and gives Samuel the proper response to make. "Here I am!" "Speak for your servant is listening!" Samuel responds to God's call and then begins his role as a prophet bringing God's people to reform.

So this is also a message of how hard it is to distinguish God's call and that we need others to help us. Alone we might never think that God is

calling us into action. Who are we that God would need us? What skills do we possess that God could actually use? But God's plan is far greater than our ideas and God was able to even use a young boy like Samuel and make him one of the greatest of the prophets. We need to be in community with others to discern God's call and just as Samuel was, we need to be open to seeking the wisdom and advice of others. And we know that in this church we are constantly praying and studying where it is that God might be calling us as a church to go and do. We have been called to create programs helping handicapped, we have been called to build homes, we have been called to work with teens in our area providing them safe places to play and learn, we have been called to the Dominican Republic to build a hospital and to the city of Cleveland to serve meals to hungry people. We do not rest and think that we have done all of what has been asked of us but ask what it is we are to do next. This year we will be asking how we can have the greatest impact on our city and the ministries within urban churches. The youth will go to new places on their mission trips where their spiritual gifts and skills will be used. And we do this as a community, because as a community we can accomplish great things.

The experience of God that Samuel had was not an end in itself. Samuel was called by God to help with spiritual challenges of his day and to create a social transformation within the Israelites. Although Samuel was called to deliver a harsh message of judgment he was also to offer the hope of a new beginning to the Israelites. We too are asked to discern God's voices and to listen to what it is that God's vision holds. We are called to be the channel for God's prophetic word and work of our time. Samuel's time was not unlike our own. It was a time of political danger, a time of corruption and social upheaval. God seemed distant from the Israelites and God was angry by their corrupt institutions and oppressive practices. God opposed them. But God rose up new prophetic leadership and called Samuel to spread the word that there is a chance for newness. During the 1960's God raised up a prophet in Martin Luther King to also say that there was a chance for newness and that through his work God's work was done. Because of Samuel, God did a new thing. Because of King, God did a new thing. Because of our ministry in this exciting time in our history and in the history of our country, God will do a new thing too. We need to be in community to discern God's call by seeking the wisdom and advice of others. And we need to give thanks that God's word is in our midst and

that God continually brings us prophets who bring us joy, who bring us visions and dreams as well as judgments.

Yes, this is going to be a big and memorable week for us in the United States of America and we should celebrate the accomplishments this means. However, when the party ends on Wednesday, we will still have to face the realities of our time. We are in a dark time in our country and one charismatic president is not going to save us from the situation we are now in. I will be surprised if in his Inaugural Address, President Obama does not call on us the American citizens into action. We are living in a time of financial crisis, unpopular wars, greedy and unmoral business practices, and political climate which is characterized by journalists as paranoid. And just as in Samuel's time God's visions and word are not frequent. However we can look back to a time 40 years ago when one man, Dr Martin Luther King, spoke of visions and God's word and see what a prophet in our recent history is capable of doing.

In an editorial by Colin Powell in yesterday's Wall Street Journal he spoke to the call to service in this time in our history that President elect Obama will announce tomorrow on MLK DAY. He wrote, "Mr. Obama has chosen on the eve of his inauguration to launch 'Renew America Together', his call for all Americans to make an ongoing commitment to better the lives of others in their communities and their country. It's fitting that he will do this on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a day when we honor the legacy of a man who loved his life in service to others and believed that 'everybody can be great, because anybody can serve.'" Mr. Powell continued that those who answer this call to enrich the lives of others will find what we already know here at Fairmount Church, That by enriching the lives of others, you get back more than you give.

And then we should pray that God's vision and word be made clear to us so that we, like Samuel, who have heard God's call can understand it and can respond, "Here I am for You called me. Speak, for your servant is listening." Oh, if we all could be like Samuel! Amen.

The Rev. Martha Shiverick M.D.V., M.S.