

Step-up and Stand-up

[Texts - I Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:35-46]

Pastor Dave Shackle

January 14, 2018

When we read about people in the Bible or contemporary individuals who claim to have received a direct call from God, we may find ourselves feeling a bit doubtful, or disheartened. Don't get me wrong - I think it's fantastic that young Samuel can hear and respond to the Holy One's voice. It's wonderful that Nathanael receives a personal invitation to follow Jesus. And Martin Luther King's call - to work for social justice and racial equality through non-violent means - is clearly a Divinely inspired gift. Be that as it may, these kind of unmistakable Divine Callings seem extremely rare these days. Maybe you yourself have thought, "Why can't God just give me a sign? Nothing spectacular, just something to let me know that the Holy One is really there - and that I'm on the right track!"

Here's the thing: I believe that most of us have *some* sense of a Divine Calling in our lives - otherwise, we probably wouldn't be here on this crisp, cold morning. I also believe that the Holy One extends some kind of call to *everyone*; though certainly not every person hears or responds to that call. In this morning's Readings, there are three specific things that stand-out, which I think can be helpful in allowing us to hear and respond to the Divine Call: *expectation*, *preparation*, and *acceptance*.

I begin with *expectation*, because our *expectations* can definitely affect both what we hear, and how we hear it. It's remarkable, that when I'm having a particularly bad day, I run into so many other negative and cranky people. Yet on my good days, almost everyone I meet seems reasonable and up-beat. Maybe, it has something to do with my own frame of mind, and my own *expectations*! Young Samuel certainly doesn't expect to hear the Holy One calling him by name. At first, he isn't sure *what* he's hearing. But after some repetition, and some wise words of instruction from old Eli, Samuel is ready to hear and respond to the Holy One.

For Samuel, as well as for you and me, *preparation* is another important part of tuning-in to the Divine Call in our lives. Samuel had been living and serving in the Temple for several years before he heard God's call. Those were years of learning and growing, listening and studying under Eli's mature guidance. And though Samuel is quite young when God speaks to him, he is ready.

Martin Luther King Jr. didn't just wake up one morning and say, "I think I'm going to lead a civil rights movement." The truth is, his entire life had been a steady preparation for that pivotal moment. His goal early in life, was to be a Baptist preacher, just like his father. In 1947, at the age of 18, Martin became a licensed minister, so he could assist his father at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. And by 1954, at age 25, he had graduated from college and seminary, and was installed as pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama.

Martin's dream of becoming an respected minister of his own congregation was progressing as planned. However, on December 5th 1955, something happened in Montgomery that would launch a different dream for Martin Luther King, Jr. and for millions of others. Rosa Parks, a seamstress returning home from a long day of work, was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white man. With her arrest began a boycott of the Montgomery Bus Company, which would last 381 days. And King, as the newly elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, became the leader of that boycott; and from that point forward, a Messenger of the *Dream*.

The Dream that freedom, equality, and justice might be realized by every person, regardless of race, color, creed, or economic status. And Martin Luther King envisioned, articulated, and represented that dream as well as anyone. Much like the prophet Samuel, King's entire life helped him prepare for that day when God would call him - through the convergence of circumstances, and the wise counsel of friends - to step forward and say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Now all this is not to say that you or I won't be able to hear the Holy One calling us if we're not *expecting* it, or *preparing* for it. However, we greatly improve our chances of hearing that Call, by regularly practicing our faith and by being sensitive to the Holy Presence which surrounds us each day. The important thing, is that we don't miss that Call because it comes to us in ways that seem too simple or too mundane. Nathanael almost misses his opportunity to follow Jesus, because God's Message comes to him in a completely ordinary way. Nathanael hears about Jesus - not in a booming voice from heaven - but by the personal testimony of his friend, Philip.

Philip says to Nathanael, "We have found the One about whom Moses and the prophets wrote. It is Jesus of Nazareth!" But Nathanael has trouble accepting that. How can God's Anointed One come from Nazareth, that little hick-town down the road? And how does Philip know that this Jesus truly is the Messiah - the Christ? It all seems too common, too improbable to accept. But Philip doesn't argue; he simply invites Nathanael to check it out for himself. "Come and See! Come and meet this Jesus, and decide for yourself!" So Nathanael accepts Philip's invitation, and the Holy One is able to touch and transform Nathanael's life through the most ordinary of means: the sincere invitation of a friend.

This morning, the Holy One can also speak to you and me through seemingly simple and ordinary ways: the kind words or actions of a friend, or a stranger; the wondrous beauty of a crisp, cold day; the stirring message or music of a certain song. Right here, the Holy One can reach-out to us all: as we lift-up one another in prayer; as we join hands in a Circle of Blessing; and as we warmly welcome others into

this Circle. Just as Philip said to Nathanael, you and I can also say,
“Come and see! Come and meet Jesus, the Christ - who lives and loves, in and through this peculiar, yet remarkable Family of Faith!”

So...if you've ever wondered what a Divine Call for your life might sound like, here it is:

“Stand-up and speak-out for justice, equality, and truth;
Reach-out to others with kindness, compassion, and encouragement;
And graciously invite others into your Family of Faith!”

They may or may not come, but at least they'll know that you care enough to ask!