

# THE CALL IN THE NIGHT

Sermon for January 18, 2009

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Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!”  
And Samuel said, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”

Imagine with me, if you will, the experience of the young boy Samuel described in the Hebrew scripture for today. When Samuel was born, according to the text, the word of the Lord was *rare*—or, in another translation of the passage, *precious*—because there were no longer frequent visions among the spiritual leaders of that time.

The power of organized religion to inspire men and women had become dim. Eli, the high priest, had become old and lifeless. He could not control his sons, who were causing havoc in the land. Eli stayed near the temple, his eyesight gone and his ability to lead withered away.

Then the Lord comes to Hannah, a young woman who is childless. She promises that if she conceives a son, she will dedicate him to the Lord’s service. Hannah’s prayers are answered, and her son Samuel is given in service to Eli and the temple. His task is to work in the sanctuary, sleeping there at night while the vigil light burns low, and then tending it and opening the doors in the morning.

We can only imagine what it must have been like for a child to grow up in such a situation. The sanctuary was an awesome and holy place, in which the Spirit of the Lord was thought to dwell. Samuel was probably raised with stories about the mighty power about the Ark of the Covenant, so holy that men were struck dead by merely touching it.

To the natural childhood fear of darkness was added the awesome sense of otherworldly forces. This must have troubled the boy forced to sleep in the sanctuary. We do not know his age when he had the experience of the voice of God described in our passage, but he was most likely between nine and thirteen. This is the time when most boys are active and extroverted, playing games with their friends. Yet here he was, tending to the needs of the aging high priest and sleeping in the darkness of the deserted temple.

We can imagine him lying there—perhaps with his blanket over his head—sneaking peeks as the shadows on the sanctuary wall expand and move as the vigil light flickers low, trying to get some sleep in the presence of the spirits that hovered around him.

Into this situation the revelation comes—not as a frightening vision, but as a human voice calling in the night--- “Samuel! Samuel!” Three times he hears the voice, and three times he responds. He goes to the priest Eli, thinking that he is being called by his earthly overseer. Finally, Eli advises him to respond to the Lord, and the scripture tells us that he receives the prophecy of the fall of the house of Eli. So begins the prophetic career of Samuel, under whose visionary leadership the kingdom is established and Saul is anointed as the first monarch of Israel.

What a wonderful story to share at St. Mark’s this month, while prospective candidates for the position of rector are visiting the parish! You are searching for a new leader, and asking that the Holy Spirit will lead you to the person who will be the one to fill this calling. And there are very few who take the serious vows of ordination who have not had some experience such as Samuel’s in the temple. Many are pursuing this vocation because they have sensed the voice of the Lord calling them quietly by name.

For one does not enter the ordained ministry lightly, or take the vows easily which in many ways set clergy apart from their peers, Oh, we are also very human—and ordination does not create a special breed of men and women. But those vows which we take at ordination bring with them a responsibility and commitment to things holy and to an intentional life of spiritual service that others cannot always share.

Listen to the words addressed by the bishop at ordination, which were taken by the rector for whom you search:

“As a priest, it will be your task to proclaim by word and deed the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to fashion your life in accordance with its precepts. You are to love and serve the people among whom you work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor.

You are to preach, to declare God’s forgiveness to repentant sinners, pronounce God’s blessing, to share in the administration Of Holy Baptism, and in the celebration of the mysteries of Christ’s Body and Blood—

In all that you do, you are to nourish Christ’s people from the riches of grace, and to strengthen them to glorify God in this life and in the life to come...”

And as if this were not enough, there follows in the ordination service of a priest a series of questions that touch on personal and family life, commitment to the scriptures and the life of prayer, and to the prophetic witness of the Gospel.

In your own parish profile, where the congregation of St. Mark's has expressed its expectations of a new rector, you have asked for the following:

A perceptive leader who will work with and strengthen the parish family.

A preacher of meaningful sermons, relating the scripture to our lives.

A pastor who will visit and counsel us in times of trouble

A warm, caring and flexible personality, who will live the Gospel with true spirituality.

It is fortunate that in the service of ordination the bishop is joined by the other priests present to lay hands on the candidate, and to pray for the inflowing of the power of God's Spirit. For there is no way that any human being, without the gift of the grace of God, could even begin to live up to either the ordination vows or the expectations of a congregation!

From my own experience I can tell you that ordination is one of the most life-changing and daunting events in human life. The person you seek as a rector will have undergone this experience, and will already have had some years in the role of leadership as a priest in the Episcopal Church.

Amidst all of the expectations, there are two dimensions of the priesthood that stand out, and are expressed in the vows and commissioning prayers. They are the pastoral and the prophetic dimensions of the ordained ministry. They reflect the life of Jesus himself, and to them both we are called—though they are sometimes in tension with one another.

In the role of pastor, a rector is called to exhibit understanding love which sees beneath the surface to the human and spiritual needs of those he or she serves. We are called into the lives of parishioners to be with them in the happy and the sad moments. We are to serve as the channel of the healing power and love of God in times of illness and loss, even as we celebrate the joyous times of marriage and birth.

But rectors are also called to the prophetic ministry, speaking the word of God as they see it boldly at all times, even when it is contrary to the prevailing culture. It is not always true that the values and actions of those about us reflect the demands of God found in our faith, and it is the task of the priest to speak the truth in such situations. That is not always pleasant, particularly in a congregation that does not want to hear that truth.

We experienced the tension of the prophetic ministry in the 1960's, when preachers true to the Gospel of Christ preached his loving acceptance of all races in a segregated society. Such

a man and prophet was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose witness resulted in his martyrdom—and whose birthday we celebrate tomorrow.

In that same decade, I found myself physically assaulted at a public meeting by a vestryman for preaching the gospel of peace during the Vietnam War, at a time when the country was deeply divided on that issue. I was told by some to stick to religion and stay out of politics, even in the face of the overwhelming scriptural evidence of the concern of God for the common life of human beings expressed in prophets such as Samuel and by Jesus himself. There exists in the ordained ministry the tension between the pastoral and the prophetic—but that tension must be lived through if the rector is to be true to the vocation of the priesthood.

It is to this challenging, exciting and fulfilling role that your new rector will come as the call is completed. That priest will be in need of your support and constant prayer. May we continue to offer that support and prayer as well to the search committee and the vestry as in the weeks ahead under the guidance of the Holy Spirit they issue the call to the third rector of St. Mark's Church in Basking Ridge.