

Epiphany 2B – MLK Sunday
Peace, Seattle
January 18, 2015
I Samuel 3:1-10, Mark 8:34-35

LISTENING IN THE DARK

I was one of a dozen students on a geology field trip with my 8th grade science class.

We had just arrived at the entrance to a vast underground complex of limestone caves, and our guide had stopped to ask one simple question. **Is anyone afraid of the dark?**

This was no joke. He told us that when we arrived at the mid-point of our underground tour, the point where we were furthest from the entrance and exit tunnels, he would be turning off the lights and we would experience **absolute darkness**.

In absolute darkness you can wave your hand in front of your face, and not detect anything. Not a shadow, not a hint of movement, nothing. And no matter how long you keep your eyes open, they will never adapt, for in order to adapt the eyes need some inkling, some trace of light, however small or distant. Down there, there would be none.

We descended into the caverns, and saw stalactites and stalagmites; strange formations, and pools of water that had first fallen as rain on Earth's surface eons before.¹

And then came the moment we had all secretly been waiting for. After giving us a warning, our guide flipped the switch, and we were engulfed in total darkness.

Darkness and silence.

After a moment, he spoke, and a dozen pairs of eager ears and useless eyes homed in on his voice. **I can't tell you exactly what he said, but I sure remember listening.**

In the opening lines from today's story of Samuel, the author paints a picture of the darkness and silence that had engulfed Israel.

**Eli, whose eyesight is failing, is lying down in his room. It is night.
The lamp of God is flickering, but has not yet gone out.
Young Samuel is lying down near the ark of the covenant.**

The young boy doesn't know it, but the experience he's about to have will signal a turning point in Israel's history. **A spiritual darkness had descended on Israel. Words from the Lord were rare; visions were not widespread.**

**WHEN A WORD FROM THE LORD IS RARE, WHERE DO YOU LISTEN FOR IT?
WHEN VISIONS ARE FEW AND FAR BETWEEN, WHERE DO YOU LOOK FOR THEM?**

Lying down in the darkness, Samuel hears a voice calling his name, and he listens. **Samuel, you see, is not afraid of the dark.**

Thinking it's Eli's voice, Samuel goes to him once, twice, three times. And finally **Eli catches on.** Could it be that God's long silence is ending? He tells Samuel what he's supposed to do. **A fourth time The Voice calls. SPEAK, LORD, says Samuel, YOUR SERVANT IS LISTENING.**

¹ Go to this link for more information and photos: <http://www.niagaracave.com/album.asp>

The turning point has come. The light that was flickering and about to go out, is renewed, Israel's future turns bright again.

When the word of the Lord is rare, where do you listen for it? Well, there is this boy, Samuel!

December 1, 1955. A black woman boards a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Her name is **Rosa Parks**. Worn out after a full day's labor she takes a seat in the middle of the bus, rather than in the section reserved for colored people—the back. Soon the bus is full.

A white man boards the bus. He approaches Rosa Parks and asks her to move. **“No.” she says, “My feet are tired.”**

The driver of the bus pulls over and orders her to give up her seat to the white man. She quietly refuses, and is promptly arrested.

News of her arrest spreads quickly, and local black leaders organize an unprecedented **mass boycott** in protest.

This single incident in Montgomery spawned one of history's greatest nonviolent revolutions, and the leader of that boycott became that revolution's spiritual chief, **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.** What they showed America more clearly than any one had before was that equality under the law was the birthright of every child of God, regardless of race, class, or creed.

To deny this is to deny an essential aspect of what it means to be human.

Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King were not afraid of the dark.

When we were back in the OTHER WASHINGTON last summer, we spent one day seeing as many memorials as we could muster: The Washington Monument, the WW2 Memorial, the Vietnam Memorial, the Lincoln Memorial, the Korean War Memorial, and the new Martin Luther King Memorial.

Each of them was impressive in its own way, but the place I found the most moving were the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, the “hallowed ground” where the 1963 March on Washington reached its zenith and Dr. King told the world he had a DREAM.

Paradoxically, the site I had the most difficulty with was the new MLK Memorial itself.

At the MLK Memorial you encounter a huge image of Dr. King carved out of white granite. A solitary figure, he stands with arms crossed, eyes fixed, face resolute. The words carved into the granite read: OUT OF THE MOUNTAIN OF DESPAIR A STONE OF HOPE.²

There are other important aspects to the Memorial—quotations from his sermons and writings and the like—but what seemed to me to be missing was the sense of community that made Dr. King such a great and inspiring leader.

God didn't call Dr. King to stand alone in the fight for justice. God called him to gather a community around principles of justice, and that's what he did. As a pastor in Christ's church, Dr. King knew the importance and the power of mobilizing a people. His appeals weren't to his own philosophy but to the principles of justice and equality he'd found inspiration for in the Scriptures. **As gifted as he was, Dr. King didn't lead the Civil Rights Movement as a solitary individual...**

² To see photos of the MLK Memorial, follow this link: <http://www.nps.gov/media/photo/gallery.htm?id=313AF650-1DD8-B71C-07476509DBD56534>

No, his words and actions—always in the company of others—awakened a community and gathered it around the principle of non-violent resistance, and he helped that community claim its dignity and strength. And the whole nation watched. And the whole world caught on.

The Voice that pierced the silence of Samuel's night is the same Voice that empowered Rosa Parks to say NO; the same Voice that called Dr. King to share the DREAM; and the same Voice that called from the shores of Galilee:

IF ANY WANT TO BECOME MY FOLLOWERS, LET THEM DENY THEMSELVES,
TAKE UP THEIR CROSS AND FOLLOW ME.

God has not ceased speaking to us.

The Word which called light into being at the very beginning of time; who became a living, breathing, dying and rising Word in Jesus, still calls us. How will we, as community, respond?

Our adult class has been reading Cynthia Moe-Lobeda's book PUBLIC CHURCH: FOR THE LIFE OF THE WORLD for the past several months, and talking about what it might mean for our congregation to become more intentionally a public church. Being a public church always involves risk. But we cannot sidestep or ignore the call.

Have you ever thought of yourselves as emblems of God's power and presence in the world?

You are.

Have you ever thought of yourselves as living symbols of God's call to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God"? **You are.**

Have you ever imagined that you may be the only word of the Lord some people will ever encounter?

It's true.

To love boldly is to love as Jesus loved. And love like that takes risks.

WHAT ARE WE WILLING TO RISK? HOW WILL WE RESPOND TO GOD'S CALL?
WHAT SORT OF COMMUNITY OF LIGHT WILL WE BE?

Let us pray:

Lord Christ, who has called us not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good, we thank you for witnesses like Martin Luther King Jr, who, like Samuel and the prophets before him, learned to listen for your Voice and to follow where you would lead—even when it led to the cross.

Give us both individually and as a congregation, the will and the fortitude to stand up to injustice wherever it may be found, and to be a community of light and hope here, in the neighborhoods where you have planted us. We pray in the strong name of our light and life, Jesus Christ. Amen.