

Sermon: Given by Rev. Dr. Rodney Kennedy

Date: Sunday, January 16, 2022

Is A Prophetic Witness Possible in the Church?

I Samuel 3:1-20

I am going to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in this sermon. I feel this year's Martin Luther King Day is critical for our nation because we are experiencing a new outbreak of racism. In the most powerful corridors of our government, racists feel empowered to once again denigrate people for being different and I don't care who you are, if your talk, your actions suggest racism, I am compelled to speak out. I am not convinced by denials. The Southern Poverty Law Center, who keeps track of hate groups, says that attacks on Muslims, Jews, and African Americans have been on the rise for the last year. Denial is just a cheap political trick. Abductive reasoning implies that you can identify an unknown subject by observing that person's habitual characteristics. It's called the Duck Test: "If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it's probably a duck."

American leaders seem to have lost the ability, as we would say in Louisiana, "to talk right." There's this ridiculous argument that our elected officials are just talking like the rest of America. If America is reduced to the language of barber shops, bars, and dry goods stores where Rednecks hang out, chewing tobacco, drinking beer, and blabbering about how they would run this country, then America is in trouble. Sure men need to blow off steam but who ever thought that steam would become a governing principle of our great democracy? I call it arguing from the least common denominator. My mother would have never bought that charade. If you said something bad about anyone, she would hit you with the atomic "Mama stare" and say, "We don't talk like that in this family." I believe that I have scars on the back of my head where the "Mama stare" exited. Well, if talking and behaving like a bunch of ignorant racists is now the norm in America, than Americans need a new norm and we need to be taught how to "talk right" about others. I believe that we must recover our dignity, our decorum, our sense of what is right and wrong and this is especially true when it comes to how we talk about fellow members of the only race on this planet: the human race. After all, our own Scripture insists that God "hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth" (KJV).

Listen, we are called by God. Yet we are not even sure God is talking to us these days. One of the problems is the way the Bible tells the stories of God calling people. The writers use a bold method of telling the story as an actual conversation with God, as if God spoke out loud in Hebrew to Samuel. If someone says God speaks out loud to them today, in plain English, people would think they were nuts.

So what are we to do with this story? We can get the idea that since God hasn't spoken out loud to us, we don't have a call from God. So what if the story is an imaginative interaction between God and Samuel? What if God is not thundering out loud from Mt. Sinai? I do not want you to think you are off the hook because God has never spoken out loud to you in English. We need these dramatic stories, these imaginative interactions to tell us who we are and what we are meant to be: a people called by God.

Maybe God is speaking in English and we are listening in dingbat as Archie Bunker once said to Edith.

Samuel is a precocious little boy raised in the house of God. I love this story because it is my story. This is how I became a preacher. My dad prayed for a son and promised to give him to the ministry. I didn't get a say in this deal with God. I was the deal. My dad got a son. God got a preacher. I got you. In cynical moments I say that the church lured me into the ministry. The pastor would give me a soft peppermint stick on Sunday and talk to me about being a preacher or a missionary. I thought I was going to get to ride elephants and I've ended up trying to herd them. The deacons would let me drink all the leftover grape juice and eat all the unleavened bread after communion. But none of that made me a preacher; it just paved the way.

"Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was." This is why I tell parents who have quit the church that they should not raise their children outside the church. This idea that you will let them make up their own minds about God is a mistake. Children don't have minds worth making up about God unless they have some God-knowledge. A child sent into the world without God is a blank slate and every magician, idol, false god and con artist in the world will have them for breakfast.

The first time God called, Samuel thought it was Eli. What happened? Samuel ran to Eli. I love the idea here that the voice of God, to the young boy, seemed to be the voice of Eli. It's a good thing when children relate us to God because we are supposed to imitate Jesus. Samuel is running back and forth between the ark of the Lord and Eli's room and finally it dawns on Eli that the boy is being called by God.

Eli says, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" We can't be prophets until we listen to the word from God. Do you think that almost no one hears God speaking today because we have paid so little attention to teaching our children to listen to God's call? Is this our problem?

Samuel was as close to the sacred space where God was most likely to speak as you can be. Sure God can speak on the lake or the golf course but I've never gotten much theological wisdom from Sunday fishermen and golfers. I go to church because if God speaks, I want to be as close to the source as possible. I think the church is the listening post for God's voice across the cosmos. Astronomers have invented all these listening devices to attempt to catch any communication from out there in the universe. I'm ok with us listening for the voice of other peoples, and I love Star Wars, but I'm more interested in God speaking to us here and now.

There is one Baptist saint that we honor as a nation: The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Make no mistake. God called Martin. During the Montgomery bus boycott, in January 1956, God's voice was heard by Dr. King. He received a threatening phone call late at night. He said: "I hung up but I could not sleep. It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point. Finally, I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. I determined to take my problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone." When he finished praying he

says that he heard the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever."

Martin was now ready to face anything and believe me he then went on to face everything. Martin received the call because he was listening and praying. Is this why we talk so much and stay so busy because we are afraid that listening and praying will cause God to get our attention and give us a task that scares us? James Weldon Johnson, American poet says, "Pin my ear to the wisdom post." Once we were a people of prayer vigils, prayer rallies, prayer marches, prayer circles, prayer meetings, and now we are a people of meetings. Our secular ways make me almost miss "casting lots" to reach good decisions.

Three nights later Martin's home was bombed. Sometimes we get the call of God when people start leaning on us and threatening us and acting unjustly toward us. Sometimes we get the call of God when we hear the uplifted cries of the oppressed.

God speaks and we, his people, need to start being better listeners. I'm no Martin Luther King, Jr. but on the night in 1980 when a group from the KKK burned a cross on my parsonage yard, some of the white-cloaked members were deacons in my own church, I gathered my children in my arms and stared into those flames and right there I knew that I had changed sides forever. I would never again be reluctant to speak hard truth to people who needed to hear hard truth. This is our prophetic calling to speak for justice against injustice. This one thing I ask of you today: Speak out against all forms of racism. Martin's dream will become a nightmare without your prophetic voices.

I have one deeply personal reason to honor Martin. On August 28, 1963 Martin preached in front of the Lincoln Memorial. That speech claimed my thirteen-year-old mind and heart. I was going to an all-white school in the land of segregation and had stood with my classmates at recess chanting: "Two, four, six, eight, we don't want to integrate" and Martin's voice broke through that noise. Sometimes I don't know what it is that sets people free from the prejudices, illusions, assumptions and beliefs of a severe religion, but in my case, I can still hear Martin's voice:

"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

From every mountainside, let freedom ring. And when this happens, and when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when *all* of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: *Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!*"

God is calling us just like he called Samuel and Martin and me. God's calling us to have a prophetic word to speak to the despicable racism of our time. You are the prophets of the most high God and you are called to speak up and speak out for truth, justice, righteousness. Speak for the human race. Drown out the voices of hate and the voices of denial. Tell everybody that speaks racist words, "We don't talk like that in Peoria." Do it every day for you are the called prophets of Almighty God.