

The Leadership Call
I Samuel 1:3-20
January 18, 2009

We stand at an historic moment in the life of our nation. Not only are we inaugurating the first African-American as President of the United States. It occurs in convergence with the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., who gave so much of his life that black people might have the opportunity to vote. Next month marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of President Abraham Lincoln, who issued the Emancipation Proclamation releasing black people from slavery in this nation. This moment in history would not have been possible without giants like Lincoln and King, men who received and answered the leadership call.

This morning we have heard the call of the young lad Samuel. Samuel was the firstborn son of his mother, Hannah. For many years she was unable to conceive. In desperation she made a plea bargain with God, promising that if God gave her a male child, she would dedicate him to the Lord for all his days. Samuel was born and once he was weaned, probably at the age of two or three, Hannah took him to the house of God at Shiloh. She entrusted his upbringing to Eli, the priest, at Shiloh.

Samuel was an acolyte, an assistant to the priest Eli. The scripture notes that “The lamp of God had not yet gone out.” In a literal sense, this expression may refer to the time prior to dawn. Priestly protocol called for the burning of lamps in the sanctuary from evening to morning. Samuel may have been slept in or near the sanctuary in order to keep the lamp of God burning. Eli would have been slept somewhere outside the inner temple precincts.

Three times Samuel heard a voice and responded, assuming that it was Eli calling for him. Eli had not issued the call but finally realized that the call was from the Lord. He encouraged Samuel to respond, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Samuel did so. Samuel received a vision of the forthcoming destruction of Eli’s household, for Eli’s sons had become corrupt and unfaithful. Although Eli had tried to discipline his sons and set them upon a holy pathway, they did not listen to their father, or to the Lord whom they supposedly served. In the vision Samuel learned that God would replace the priestly line of Eli with new leadership. In revealing this decree of divine judgment, Samuel was inaugurated as a prophet of the Lord and a proclaimer of the divine word.

We need to give Eli credit for the grace with which he accepts the divine verdict. Instead of trying to defend himself and his position, he recognized the hand of the Lord in vision revealed to Samuel. He responded, “It is the Lord; let

him do what seems good to him.” He gracefully accepted the transfer of leadership decreed by God.

The roles were then reversed. Eli looked to Samuel for instruction in the ways of the Lord. Eli’s authority ended, while Samuel’s had just begun. The passage we heard offers an affirmation of Samuel’s ministry. “The Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.” Samuel’s words were reliable and trustworthy. As a prophet, he was a channel through whom God spoke. God’s word came to the prophet, but the prophet passed that word on in his own words. The prophet speaks *for* God, not *as* God.

Samuel answered the leadership call. It was not an easy time in which to be in leadership. The word of the Lord was rare; the sons of Eli were corrupt; the Philistines were about to threaten Israel’s survival. It was a time of spiritual desolation, religious corruption, political danger, and social upheaval. Samuel was called to deliver a harsh message of judgment that was necessary in order for a hopeful new beginning to arise for Israel. God raised up new prophetic leadership in order to create new possibilities for the future.ⁱ

We hear in Samuel’s story several characteristics of quality leadership. One is the ability to be discerning. Although Samuel did not initially recognize the call in the night as the voice of the Lord, he trusted the word of his mentor, Eli, and listened. A leader hears many voices advocating different perspectives and positions. A leader must have a solid foundation of values to distinguish which voices speak of truth and justice, and which do not.

Christian leaders listen for the word of the Lord. The story of Samuel’s calling opens with the acknowledgement that “the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” We wonder, was the word of the Lord rare because God was absent, or because people did not know how to listen and look for God’s presence among them? Sometimes we even need to scrutinize the voice within us and ask ourselves whether what we hear is our own voice or indeed the voice of God. A wise leader is discerning.

A second leadership quality we find in Samuel is moral courage. The word he heard from the Lord was painful for him and for his beloved mentor, Eli. Yet Samuel dared to speak the truth of divine judgment. Wise leaders know that oftentimes they must choose to do the right thing instead of the popular thing. It may cost them friendships, but it wins them integrity.

In his book, *Moral Courage*, Rushworth Kidder suggests that moral courage is the courage to be moral. It is based upon five core values of honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness and compassion.ⁱⁱ He also notes that “*having values* is different from *living by values*.”ⁱⁱⁱ If we don’t lift our values from the theoretical and apply them to the practical, they are of little worth. Our values should carry us beyond ethical reasoning into principled action.

This is the kind of leadership we celebrate in this historic moment. This is the kind of leadership for which our nation and our world yearns in our political leaders. This is the kind of leadership God seeks in all those who follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

We often find inspiration for living principled lives by looking back at leaders who have exercised discernment and moral courage. It is timely to look at the leadership of the civil rights movement in our nation.

Tom Kintner shared with me a sermon given by his father, Rev. Dwight Kintner on September 1, 1963, at First Methodist Church in Flushing, New York. Four days before the sermon, Dwight was present for the historic March on Washington in which Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his famous, “I have a dream” speech. In his sermon reflecting on the event, Dwight said, “It has been acknowledged that the demonstration—the largest of any in the nation—was in keeping with the highest traditions of the democratic process....It was [also] in keeping with our religious heritage of bringing to bear a moral force upon a governmental agency to obtain a God given right of his children. Moses went to Pharaoh. Do you remember that Christ and his disciples marched on Jerusalem? Luther went to Rome and Wesley to London.

“And now we have come to Washington. ‘Late we come,’ said the Reverend Dr. Eugene Carson Blake of the National Council of Churches, “in the reconciling and repentant spirit in which Abraham Lincoln once replied to a delegation of morally arrogant churchmen. He said, “Never say God is on our side, rather pray that we may be found on God’s side.””^{iv}

United Methodist Bishop Woodie White has written an annual letter to Martin Luther King, Jr., on his birthday since 1976. This year he wrote, “Until now, I have not written a letter when I’ve been as consumed with joy as I am today. Joy beyond description!”^v

He remembers the despair he and millions of others felt upon the tragic death of King and of the joy he feels four decades later. He recalls, “It seems only yesterday that black people were battling for the opportunity to vote. Many died seeking that right. State by state, it eventually changed. But scarcely anyone glimpsed a future when a black man would be elected president of the nation.

“Those days of marches and protests were aimed at simple but important goals: to eat at a lunch counter, to try on a garment before you purchased it, to attend a school in the neighborhood where you lived, to be hired for a job for which you were qualified, and yes, to exercise the most fundamental right of citizenship, to vote. We sought to be accepted, and to be treated as a person and a full citizen in our own nation.”

Bishop White writes of Mr. Obama’s announcement of his candidacy for president in front of the state capitol in Springfield, Illinois. “Springfield, you will

recall, was the site of two days of rioting in 1908. White mobs had burned the homes and businesses of black residents, causing thousands to flee the city. Eight people—black and white—were tragically killed.

“The event prompted leaders to convene a meeting in New York City and resolve that a new organization was needed to address the nation’s racial ills. The result was the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

“The organization will observe the 100th anniversary of its founding in the same year the nation witnesses its first black president take office!”

Bishop White notes the selection of Rev. Joseph Lowery, a United Methodist pastor, to offer the benediction at the presidential inauguration. Lowery co-founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with King in 1957. King named Lowery as chairman of the delegation to take demands of the Selma-to-Montgomery March in 1965 to Alabama Gov. George Wallace. Wallace had ordered the marchers beaten—an episode that became known as “Bloody Sunday.” Wallace apologized to Lowery in 1995 as the civil rights pioneer led the 30th anniversary re-enactment of the historic march that led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act.

Lowery has been asked how he feels about his clergy colleague, Rick Warren, who will offer the invocation at the inauguration. He said, “I am not afraid to stand with people with whom I have differences.” He recalled during the aftermath of the civil rights battles he gave a workshop on race relations for members of the Ku Klux Klan. “A judge gave them a choice of going to jail or taking my workshop,” he said. Laughing, he added, “About five of them took the class.”^{vi}

Wise leaders discern right from wrong, just from unjust, good from evil. Wise leaders have the moral courage to act upon those principles, even at the risk of great cost. May we be discerning and morally courageous when the leadership call comes our way, whether it be in our families, church, community, state, nation, or world. Let us pray for discernment and moral courage in those chosen to lead our nation and other nations.

God of Justice and Mercy, as we stand at a significant threshold in history, we are reminded that you are still at work in the world. Out of suffering and sorrow, you bring new life. You lift us up from the pits of despair into the light of hope and joy. We know, O God, that you can only be at work when we stop hindering you and no longer put obstacles in your way. Forgive us for our slowness to learn your ways of mercy and justice. Forgive our refusal to accept one another because of the color of skin or the sound of an accent or the nation of

origin. May we see with your untarnished vision the gifts of one another and the beauty in our differences.

May our nation seize this opportunity for renewal. Open its citizens to fresh understandings of the beloved community which you desire for all people. Embolden each of us to speak and act the message of Jesus, even when it means taking risks out of our own comfort zones.

Abide with President-elect Obama as he undertakes the leadership of our country. Guide him and his cabinet in the ways of justice which mean life for all. We pray for reconciliation with and in other lands, between Israelis and Palestinians, Indians and Pakistanis, and others in conflict.

Be present in our lives where there is tension and conflict. Enter into families who find themselves stressed by the challenges of daily living. Sustain employees who fear for their jobs and with those who have lost their jobs. May your spirit of gentleness soothe their troubled souls.

Abide with our children and youth, that they might achieve the potential you have planted within each of them. Offer your comfort to those who do not love themselves and your guidance to those who feel lost.

May your healing touch rest upon those who are weak in body, mind, or spirit.....

ⁱ Bruce C. Birch, *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. XII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 994.

ⁱⁱ Rushworth M. Kidder, *Moral Courage: Ethics in Action* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2005), p. 10.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 3.

^{iv} Rev. Dwight Kintner, "Brave Enough to be Free," September 1, 1963, Flushing Methodist Church, New York.

^v Bishop Woodie W. White, United Methodist News Service, January 13, 2009, www.umc.org.

^{vi} Kathy Gilbert, United Methodist News Service, January 14, 2009, www.umc.org.

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