

# **Unheard Messages and Unlikely Messengers**

*Based upon 1 Samuel 3:1-10 and John 1:43-51*

*January 15, 2006 by Rev. Mark Seifried*

## **ML King Birthday and Second Sunday After Epiphany – Townsend Congregational Church, UCC**

In our Hebrew Bible lesson for this morning, we are told that God was about to do something in Israel that will make both the ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. God's messenger to the people would be an unlikely candidate: Samuel, an altar boy looking after the old man, Eli, assisting him in ministry.

And then in our gospel lesson, we meet Jesus traveling around Galilee. We assume from information gleaned from other Bible stories that Jesus was touring, teaching about the word of God that was given to him and trying to put together a group who would share ministry with him. When Nathanael heard about Jesus' being from Nazareth, he asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nazareth, it seems, was the sort of place where people we would call "hicks" and "yahoos" might live. Folks from Nazareth lived simple lives and nobody expected much from them. When I lived in Nashville, TN, people there used to think the same things about people living in Kentucky towns not so far away. There were jokes told about Kentuckians in small towns that usually could fit the mold of "How many Kentuckians does it take to change a light bulb?" or "Why did the Kentuckian cross the road?" Jokes like that were being told about Nazarenes in Jesus' time.

Today, we remember the life of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. - another unlikely messenger of God. As a boy he grew up in the Segregated Southeastern United States. When Martin was growing up in Atlanta, that city was steeped in social strife Atlanta was a bastion for African Americans who had left plantations. It was impoverished and

most its black citizens would die in similar conditions to their birth: poor, uneducated, doing backbreaking work no one else wanted, prone to a life on the streets. You likely wouldn't trust a black boy from Atlanta.

Let's just keep those images of unlikely messengers in our minds for the moment: young and uneducated Samuel, Jesus the hick, and Martin, perhaps destined for a life on the streets, perhaps destined for a novel expression of faith.

\*\*\*\*\*

The lessons of the church year are designed to teach us different ways of relating to God. Advent teaches us that God comes to us. We are now in the midst of Epiphany, the season after Christmas that teaches us that we have to search for God. During the Christmas season, some of us may have been prone to what the evangelist J.I. Packer called "Rhapsody without realism." In a book called "Rediscovering Holiness," Packer suggests that some of our hearts concentrate on experiences of divine love, ecstasies of assurance, expressions of heavenly love, and maintaining excitement in our communion with Christ. Some feel that this is the essence of true holiness. Packer suggests that "rhapsody without realism is not Christ-like, and it is a failure in holiness rather than a form of it." Those caught in rhapsody often ignore their neighbor and even tend to ignore the needs of their own family.

Packer says something similar of those whose hearts glow with the love of God's law. Folks in this camp are those who are meticulous in business, careful in their home life to follow tradition, correctness in church, conscientious in shunning evil and avoiding worldly activities like drinking and gambling. These folks are insistent in maintaining God's truth and pointing out the errors of others in any company.

Relationally, they are cool and distant people who see rulebook rightness as the essence of holiness. They concentrate on formal correctness rather than personal closeness either to God or to fellow human beings.

Many of us are caught somewhere in the middle of gazing at the stars while searching for God's essence and preparing for our heavenly reward by doing things just right. Martin Luther King, Jr. convicted himself of this when he refused to acknowledge his silence toward the Viet Nam War and thus his complicity what he called "the vocation of agony." Following that Epiphany, Dr. King espoused that people who are blind to death and destruction of one group while touting moral

righteousness elsewhere eviscerate the message of liberation to which Christ bore witness.

To some degree, this is the story of the Christian church. For some, it is also our personal story. We latch onto one element of knowing God as if we have attained the ultimate wisdom and spiritual truth. In doing so, we forsake other ways of knowing God. I think that the beauty of our religious tradition in the United Church of Christ is that we have a wonderful mix of personal piety. Our faith expressions range from sacramental to avant-garde. We approach mystical experiences and communion with Christ while attempting to transform the world to be more peaceful and loving.

At the heart of our work and worship we encounter Jesus, the Jewish outsider from Nazareth. Despite the interpretations of some who see him as the continuation of Old Testament law, we see him as someone very different. Rather than holding people to a code of conduct and moral law, Jesus tried hard to make people understand that God loves them just as they are. Jesus knows we are human. God made us that way and it is human to be weak and imperfect. God did not intend to make us like little gods. God created each of us to do a little job, to make our contribution to help others and perfect God's creation. God gave each of us just what we need to do the job. The rest of our personality is imperfect and that is all right. I will and you will become, in God's good time, what God wants us to become. As long as we love God and care for others, we need not be afraid.

It is paradoxical that the church has assumed the role of Christ's stand-in. Throughout much of history, the church has picked only the aspects of Christ's life that appealed to its need for power. For example, in the middle of the 19th Century when ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs were being decoded, the Roman Catholic Church attempted to silence the decoders because some of their findings contradicted facts in the Bible. Jesus came to bear witness to religious truth, not to bury it. The church is the extension of Jesus' life in the world, but if it is to be effective, it must model itself on the way Jesus lived. Nobody was afraid of Jesus when he came to earth. They followed him everywhere because they knew he understood their anguish and their pain and looked past their failings. Sinners felt comforted in the presence of Jesus, and their lives changed in time.

In our congregation, we have people who give us a sense of God's presence. They are role models that emulate various aspects of God. I see God-like nurturing in Nancy Clough. I see God-like creativity in Glenda. I see God-like compassion in Nancy Shepherd and faithfulness in Art Vartanian. I see God-like intelligence in Gary Hatch. Well, not so much intelligence. Let's just say we can tell God had a sense of humor when He made Gary. Seriously . . . I see elements of God all around me. And this God is crafty, picking a widow to show us how to love, calling a saint from the streets of segregated Atlanta to highlight the disparity between the have's and the have-not's. God picked an outsider from Nazareth, a hick, to show us the essence of salvation.

Throughout much of our lives, we are searching for God's salvation. Prone to sin, we look for spiritual ecstasy in liturgy, music, wine bottles and youthful human bodies. We look for justice in civic law and spiritual order. We look for new ways to relate to God by trying contemporary worship in our churches, reading self-help books and following social trends. The fact is that we are looking too hard to find God. God speaks to each of us and through each of us. And, in God's world, the stranger the better. God chose Samuel, Jesus and Martin because they were strange. They knew God differently and they saw the world differently than their contemporaries.

Indeed, our faith has the potential to grow as our worldview grows. Every person we encounter, every author we read, every work of art we chance upon, we are offered another glimpse of God. Jesus stunned his disciples and religious leaders by disregarding the social norms of his day. To a total outsider, a Samaritan woman, He offered gifts and accepted the gifts of God. He did miracles for Gentiles and Jews. He allowed social outcasts to be his disciples and allowed them to listen to his teachings, despite the so-called wisdom of his day.

It's almost as if God presents us with unusual people to expand our knowledge of God. Israel needed a new perspective on its life and received it from the boy Samuel, and centuries later from Jesus of Nazareth. The US needed a new perspective on its life and received it from a Negro in Atlanta. It's like God sends outsiders to communities so that we can hear messages we never heard before. Outsiders give us new ways to experience the word of God.

This congregation has been welcoming more visitors recently and that is a good thing, but also a frightening thing. Every new member changes

the look and feel of the church. If we continue to grow, odds are that within a few years we will bear little resemblance to the church we are today. The alternative is for us not to welcome outsiders. Communities that do that grow old together, deteriorate and die together. If the church is to grow toward God, we will invite the gifts of others with their strength and the weakness. In doing so, we invite a new reality and encourage different dreams – perhaps the dreams and reality that Jesus, the yahoo from Nazareth came proclaiming to Israel.

As we continue our search for God, let us remember that dreams do come true, if we but dare to listen to our own and consider outsiders' dreams. Forty-six years ago, Dr. King had a dream for America. Much of that dream has become reality. Little black boys and little white girls can join hands with little white boys and little white girls as sisters and brothers. Let us join with our brother Martin's dream: that the liberating message of Christ is heard by people everywhere, both insiders and strangers; that we are all able to gather in God's grace; that through our efforts to welcome unheard messages and unlikely messengers this community might become an oasis of love and freedom. May it be so and done in Jesus' life-giving name. Amen.

J.I. Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1992) pg. 163.