

The story of Samuel, hearing the voice of God, has been used over and over again as an example of faithful obedient service. A number of hymns have been written about it, and in almost all of them the scene is portrayed as something sweet and hopeful. Listen to a verse of one such hymn...

*When little Samuel woke / And heard His Maker's voice,
At every word He spoke / How much did he rejoice!
Oh, blessed, happy child! to find / The God of heaven so near and kind.*

Here's one more, with lyrics that suggest Samuel's encounter with the Divine is gentle, and his response given gladly.

*To the Savior's gentle call / With meek and loving heart reply;
For Him freely leaving all / Gladly answer Here am I.*

The problem is that Samuel's experience is not as sweet, or happy, or gentle as these hymns suggest. To begin with, he doesn't have any context to help him understand what is happening to him. "The word of the LORD was rare in those days", it says, and visions and visitations were not a common phenomenon. Add to that, the fact that Samuel "did not yet know God or God's word" so he couldn't have known who he was speaking to, even after Eli tells him to say "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening".

Samuel must have been terrified when God spoke his name into the quiet, dark sanctuary where he slept. He must have been scared stiff when God stood in front

of him and told him of the terrible violent punishment Eli and all of Eli's family would receive. No wonder poor Samuel lay silent and afraid until morning.

Let's just make a note of the fact that the assistant (which is what Samuel is) to the priest, (who is the inter-me-di-ary between God and the people) does not know God. Eli was not doing a good job as a priest. And I'm frankly disappointed in the way he treats poor Samuel once morning does break. Eli threatens him with a curse. He says to Samuel "May God do so to you, and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you". So, out of fear, not out of confidence or moral certainty, or a heartfelt sense of doing the work of God, out of fear Samuel tells Eli the difficult news.

In 1st Samuel Chapter 4 you can read about what happens to Eli if you're interested. It's not pretty. Because of the immoral behavior of his sons, which he fails to confront, God eventually removes Eli from power, and after some time, Samuel steps into this leadership void, becoming recognized by all of Israel as a true and trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

In today's passage from the Gospel of John, we find another prophet and another vision. Philip and Nathaniel proclaim Jesus as Rabbi, the Son of God, and the King

of Israel all because Jesus tells them that he saw them under a fig tree; something he apparently couldn't have known about. That is all it takes for them to believe. But Jesus says to them, "That's nothing. You just wait. You'll see even greater things than these." And in a likely reference to his death and resurrection, and the journey before him, Jesus describes to them a picture of angels traveling between heaven and earth.

I'm not sure I would agree with James Faust on very many things, but I do appreciate the quote of his on the front of the bulletin. He wrote that "Honesty is more than not lying, it is truth telling, truth speaking, truth living, truth loving." I think that those who strive to speak truth, live truth and love in truth are engaging in prophetic action. And there are many examples of such present day prophets. But on this particular weekend, we pause as a country to remember the significance of the Civil Rights Movement and the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Some would try to discredit King by pointing to any and all decisions he made that were questionable. But MLK Day is not really just about the man, Martin Luther King, Jr. As The National Constitution Center has described it "...the King holiday serves multiple purposes: It honors the total legacy of King; focuses on the

issue of civil rights; highlights the use of nonviolence to promote change; and calls people into public service.” What MLK Day does is it provide us an opportunity to honor the wide range of past and present day prophets who work to tell the truth of human dignity.

Let me tell you about one such prophet - Claudette Colvin. On March 2, 1955, Colvin boarded a bus in downtown Montgomery. She and three other Black students were told to give up their seats for a white woman. Emboldened by the black history she had been learning in school, Colvin refused. She was arrested and put on indefinite probation. The reason you may not know her name is because even though Colvin’s courageous act occurred nine months before Rosa Parks’ similar protest, the NAACP chose to use Parks, a 42-year-old civil rights activist, as the public face of the boycott, because they believed Colvin, as an unwed mother who became pregnant at age 16, would not be the best face for the movement. Although Colvin felt slighted, she later joined three other women—Mary Louise Smith, Aurelia Browder and Susie McDonald—as plaintiffs in *Browder v. Gayle*, the case that ultimately overturned bus segregation in Alabama.

Here’s another who deserves our respect and recognition. As the chairperson of the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC) Diane Nash organized sit-ins

at segregated lunch counters throughout Nashville. She was committed to nonviolent action, which proved very effective in ending discriminatory practices. Interestingly, Nash was convicted of contributing to the delinquency of minors for teaching them nonviolent tactics.

She also took on responsibility for the Freedom Rides, a protest against segregated bus terminals that took place on Greyhound buses from Washington D.C. to Virginia. When the original organizing group of these rides encountered a mob of angry seg-re-ga-tion-ists in Alabama, and were brutally beaten and couldn't finish the route, the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee —under the direction of Nash — continued the protest from Birmingham, Alabama, to Jackson, Mississippi. At the time, Nash said that they "...recognized that if the Freedom Ride was ended right then, after all that violence, [then] southern white racists would think that they could stop a project by inflicting enough violence on it...". "...we wouldn't have been able to have any kind of movement for voting rights," Nash said "for buses, public accommodations or anything after that, without getting a lot of people killed first." And so, "Nash and her peers continued the Freedom Rides, despite the objections of many powerful people, including Attorney General Robert Kennedy" who tried to get Nash to call it off (history.com). Past and present day prophets who did their best to tell the truth.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described the “Beloved Community” as a society where “caring and compassion drive political policies”, but he also described it as a nonviolent movement of courageous people led by love to seek, preserve and create community. That’s what we are called to be; a living, breathing courageous body of people speaking truth when faced with injustice, just like Samuel. A body of people living the truth of self-sacrifice like Jesus. A body of people willing to put reputation, resources and lives on the line to protect others, especially the most vulnerable like King, Colvin and Nash.

There are still, and always will be, truths yet to speak; truths yet to live and love into being. Some of them are huge social truths. Some of them are individual personal truths that maybe only you know about. The question is, will we be courageous enough to say “here I am” even when we are afraid? Will we be willing to say “put me to work”, even when we are unsure? Will we each take on the challenge of making sure that love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred in all of our relationships? Can we actually BE the Beloved Community?

My prayer is that the Spirit of Christ, our constant companion, would give us the wisdom and the strength we need to make it so. Amen.