

**“God’s Rare Word”**  
**I Samuel 3:1-20**  
**San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ**  
**Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore**  
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I was 12 years old when 250,000 people gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial for the march on Washington. I learned about the civil rights movement mainly through television and newspapers. I do remember my father was a supporter of civil rights. I sensed that he knew that an absence of civil rights was contrary to God’s will. My father was minister in Kansas and Texas during the 60’s. The churches were still segregated, but he would go to support revival meetings at sister African American churches, and I would sometimes ask to go with him. I remember once sitting in the back row of a very full church, my dad and I were the only white folks there. And I experienced for the first time the spirit and energy of worship with people who really knew how to praise God.

But my experience was nothing compared to many those who knew firsthand the march for civil rights and justice. I am a recipient of the prophetic legacy of a movement and of its people and of one of its great leaders whose birthday we celebrate tomorrow, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. But even though I’m only a recipient of a legacy, still every time I read his words, or listen to his speeches, I am spellbound by this prophet who preached in a time and place when God’s word was far too rare.

Today’s Hebrew scripture tells us that Samuel, also lived in a land where the word of the Lord was rare. Our story begins as Hannah goes to the shrine at Shiloh. She weeps and pleads for God to give her a child. She promises that if she bears a son, she will give him up to the service of God. Samuel is born! And when he is three, Hannah presents her son to God at Shiloh where Eli was the priest.

A few years later, Samuel has an experience of the Holy. Samuel was asleep and he hears a voice, “Samuel, Samuel!” He thinks it’s Eli calling him and he runs to him saying “Here I am!” But it’s not Eli. He hears his name called again and then a third time, and by now, Eli knows who’s calling Samuel’s name! The old man says to Samuel, “next time you are called, say, ‘Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.’” So the next time Samuel responds: “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” Samuel answers the call of God’s rare word.

What a sweet story this is until God says more. “I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.” God tells Samuel that Eli and his family will be punished. Chapter 2 says there are two reasons God is going to punish Eli’s family: One is they have committed injustices to the poor; and the second reason is that they have abused their power.

The next morning Eli says to Samuel, “Samuel, did you do what I told you to?” “Yes, Eli, I did what you told me to.” “Well, Samuel, what did God tell you?” Can you imagine this young boy having the courage to tell his elder God’s words of damnation? After all, messengers are often the first to get shot! But somehow Samuel manages to say the words that spelled doom to Eli’s family. Listen to how Eli replies: “Well, it is the Lord; let the Lord do what seems good.”

I find Eli’s acceptance of these words so strange. Eli doesn’t hire a famous lawyer; he doesn’t plea bargain; he simply says, “It is the Lord; let the Lord do what seems good.” This is not a common human response. We like to make excuses when we’re caught in the act. At the very least, we present the complexity of the issues, as if to say, our guilt is not so clear cut, Lord. Eli either felt there was simply no defense for the actions of his family. Or perhaps, like Martin Luther King, Jr., would say years later, truth forever cannot be pressed to the ground.

For the Hebrew people God’s word carried power. God’s rare word once spoken from the lips of a prophet brought into being a new reality. God’s word was like the power of a magic spell. They couldn’t be taken back. They caused something to happen. In the Bible the word of God is often spoken at critical times of crisis or chaos. There was chaos and God said, “Let there be

light.” The Bible says that another time God speaks is when the people are apathetic or numb to what is going on around them. Then God’s prophets would arise and be given the word. They told the truth of God’s deep pain for those being abused and mistreated. God’s rare word was not a 20 minute sermon that folks came and sat and listened to and then soon forgot. God’s rare word once spoken was a catalyst that caused events to unfold like a domino effect. And prophets were channels through which the divine word flowed and the community recognized them as special conduits of God. Prophets spoke God’s words and change happened!

Change is hard! It’s much easier to become numb or apathetic or just ignore what needs changing than to take the difficult path--a road less traveled. Human beings and societies in general don’t change easily. To change means a loss of something else, at the very least, it is the loss of the familiar. And loss is associated with unpleasant feelings. But sometimes we are forced to change because the way things are becomes more painful than the pain brought on by change. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could change without first having to endure a catastrophe?

The first thing that needs to happen in order for us to change is to become aware of what is going wrong. This is when prophets can be a great help to us. If we listen attentively to prophets who channel God’s rare word, then we can become aware of what needs to change. We have to train our ears to listen for the word of God and open our hearts to what we hear. We have to listen to the lessons from our past and the voices which even now cry out to be heard.

Years ago, I was watching the videos, “Eyes on the Prize.” when Allison, who was about 9 walked through the room just as Bull Connors’ police were dousing demonstrators with fire hoses. She cried out, “Mommy, what’s happening.” It was a chance to tell her a piece of history, a legacy of our past, that she’d not fully heard, a story about God’s justice long overdue. We must remember the stories of our past so that we may recognize similar injustices that may happen today.

There’s an old story about the beloved prophet, Bel Shem Tov who was dying and so he sent for his disciples. “I have acted as intermediary for you. When I am gone you must do this for yourselves. You know the place in the forest where I call to God, stand there in that place. You know how to light the fire and you know how to say the prayer. Do all of these and God will come.”

After the Bel Shem Tov died, the first generation did exactly as he had instructed, and God always came. But by the second generation, the people had forgotten how to make the fire in the way the Bel Shem Tov had taught them. Nevertheless, they stood in the special place in the forest, and they said the prayer and God came. By the third generation the people had forgotten how to light the fire and they had forgotten the place in the forest, but they spoke the prayer. and God still came. In the fourth generation, everyone had forgotten how to light the fire, and no one any longer remembered where in the forest one should stand, and the prayer itself could not be recalled, but one person still remembered the story about it all, and told it aloud, and God still came.

The ultimate gift of our prophets is this: that “at least one soul remains who can tell the story and that by the recounting of the tale the greater forces of love, mercy, of generosity and strength are called forth into being in the world.

I am the first generation to receive the legacy of one Martin Luther King, Jr., who brought to us God’s rare words. My daughter is the second; her children will be the third. The legacy must be passed on and new ones created. At least one soul must remain to tell the story of God’s rare word, so that God’s word spoken becomes a new way of being and that new way of being is the kingdom of God.