

Choosing Hope
Epiphany2B, 1 Samuel 3:1-10
Grace Church Newton
January 14, 2024

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The noise is kicking up. Can you hear it? Is it inside your body yet, causing that unsettled feeling? Do you, like me, find yourself glancing at the news on your phone a little bit more often each day than you did the day before? We're entering a period of maximum ambient noisiness, otherwise known as a presidential election year in these times...the outcome is uncertain and the consequences will matter.

As we remember this weekend the life and work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I've been thinking – in this noisiness – about Dr. King's oft-repeated refrain in his later speeches – one which I'm sure you'll all recognize: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." (So, I've been thinking about that.).

At the same time, this weekend we note the official beginning of the presidential election starting with the Republican party's Iowa caucuses tomorrow – the official beginning of this consequential national decision-point. As we move into this season, the current state of affairs in our country and in the world might prompt even the optimistic among us to raise an eyebrow at Dr. King's assertion. Are we sure? Are we sure the arc of the universe bends toward justice? Indeed, a powerful critique of King's hopeful refrain comes to mind. It was Ta-Nehisi Coates, who countered that, for him, the universe's "moral arc ben[ds] toward chaos then conclude[s] in a box" [\[Source\]](#). Strong statement.

We want to believe that the universe bends toward justice, but sometimes it's hard to see how we get there. We are in the middle of great uncertainty right now. As the culture war in our country deepens; as the foundation of truth that we rely on for measured engagement wobbles; as people's faith in institutions – including the very mechanisms for democratic elections – continues to erode; as the noise kicks up, dialing up diatribe, drowning out dialogue, it can feel that the arc of the universe – at least in these times – may not be bending toward justice. And it can be hard to know how to have an impact on the outcome.

This, this is what we bring with us as we encounter our scripture passages for today. In every line, it seems, something jumps out as being relevant for consideration in our context. There is much richness. If I boil it down, though, for us, for today, ***I hear us being invited to hope.***

Here are some of the things I notice in today's passages – some thoughts perhaps worth teasing out.

- For starters, in such a noisy time as ours, it's interesting to note that Samuel hears God's word at night, alone in the temple, when everyone is asleep. In the stillness, God calls out, "Samuel. Samuel." In Hebrew, the name *Sam-u-el* means God has heard [[Source](#), 245]. Given the context of this particular passage from the first book of Samuel, when God calls, "*Sam-u-el*, I have heard," it's easy to imagine God calling out to say, "I am here. I have heard my people calling out for justice. I have heard."

For Samuel, God is made known in the stillness. For Moses, too: alone on a mountain. For Elijah, God didn't appear in the wind, or the earthquake, or the fire, but in a "still small voice" (1 Kings 19:11-12). Maybe we need to find calm in the chaos in order to hear God's voice. Maybe we need to quiet the swirl of news and media and information to hear God assuring us, "I have heard."

This I notice in today's scripture: God comes to us in the stillness.

- I also notice that Samuel doesn't recognize God without help. Three times Samuel mistakes God's voice for that of Eli. Each time he rushes to Eli's room: "Here I am! You called?" Samuel heard the call, but doesn't know how to recognize God. It takes Eli's wisdom and experience to help Samuel understand what he is hearing.

In stillness we can hear, and in community we discern meaning.

- Finally, I hear in today's scripture a reminder to keep our hearts open to new things – a call for us to trust in the promise that God can create something new. If we kept reading today's story from Samuel, the next verses reveal why God roused Samuel from sleep: God is planning to remove Eli and his sons as the temple priests. God sees their abuse of the temple and of the people, God has heard the cries for justice, and has decided to rest authority in a new leader, Samuel. A new thing is coming into being. The old is passing away.

Today's gospel promises a new order, too. Calling upon an image his audience would have been familiar with, Jesus offers this vision: "You will see heaven opened

and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (John 1:51). Jesus is offering himself as a bridge between heaven and earth, as the means by which a new kingdom, God’s kingdom, will come to be.

So, from the middle of this noise in which we find ourselves, with uncertainty swirling around, scripture speaks to us: if we can bring ourselves to a still, silent place, God will be there to meet us; there is power in a community’s care and love; we are promised that God hears our cries for justice and is able to bring about new things. We may not see it very clearly right now. We may not see it at all. It may look more like chaos than a smooth arc bending with purpose. Dr. King...he did proclaim that the universe bends toward justice, but he never said the path would be smooth. We may feel far away from his vision today. And in truth, uncertainty never goes away. That is the nature of life, the nature of humanity.

So, what, then, distinguishes a viewpoint in which a moral force sweeps away injustice from one that sees history as chaotic and ending in a box? As I read today’s scripture, and indeed, the whole of the Christian tradition, the difference is **hope, hope in things not seen**. The difference is knowing that God reaches out to us; knowing that we are in community, knowing that God can bring about new things...even when we can’t see it right now.

An author whose work I admire, a former professor of homiletics at Duke Divinity School, writes of Dr. King: “No portrait of King that neglects his ministerial identity and commitments will do justice to the true character of his achievement...he discovered his identity and calling in the church, fashioned his world in the image of the Bible, trusted the power of the spoken Word, endeavored to practice Christian love at all times, and couldn’t shake the preacher’s chronic infatuation with conversion.”¹ In short, in a noisy world of jagged edges, Dr. King chose love. Dr. King chose hope.

May God give us grace to do the same in our own time.

Amen.

¹ Lischer, Richard. *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word that Moved America*. Oxford University Press: New York, Oxford, 1995, p. 267.