

Will We Receive and Trust God's Affirmation?

Beloved friends and neighbors, on this second Sunday in the season of Epiphany (illumination), this day of remembering the story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River and the calling of Samuel, and this weekend of recognizing the legacy of the Rev. Dr. King, we wonder: will we receive and trust God's affirmation? Let's begin this time of wonder and reflection with words of prayer:

God of all, we welcome your illuminating presence among us this morning. Open us to listening more quietly, receiving more deeply, and trusting more fully your affirmation of our belovedness. Amen.

Today's stories – the call of the young boy, Samuel, and the call of the young man, Jesus – invite us to appreciate a spiritually responsive cycle that consists of **listening, receiving, and trusting**. I have always felt a fondness for the story of Samuel hearing God calling to him as he lay near the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple. My son Sam was, in part, named after my younger brother Sam. Yet both were named after this biblical figure – the young acolyte and prophet-in-the-making, Samuel. The Ark of the Covenant contained the stone tablets on which Moses had receive the ten commandments – ways of life from God to guide the Hebrew people in their way of life.

We heard in the reading, *"The word of God was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."* Samuel's day to day living centered upon assisting Eli, an aging priest, with caring for the space where people came to worship God. I wonder: what conditions made it possible for Samuel's mind, body and spirit to hear the voice of God calling with urgency in the night, *"Samuel! Samuel!"* Perhaps Samuel felt safe, comfortable, and even at peace in his Temple home under the guidance of Eli.

I wonder, for each of us: what conditions make it possible for you to sense the voice or company of God (that it, Divine Love) very present with you? Are you most available to and aware of the presence of Love when you are in a particular place, at a certain time of day, or when engaged in a particular activity? Would anyone care to share aloud that place, time of day, or activity in which you most fully sense God's presence with you? *[Morning coffee... Boundary Waters... When I go to bed at night...In my children's hugs.]*

Samuel was lying down but not yet asleep. He may have been reviewing the day in his mind or thinking ahead to the next day. But I have a hunch he was more likely mindfully present in that moment, letting himself let go of attachments – mind, body, and spirit. Whether or not he was actively listening for God's voice, Samuel was available and ready to hear it when it came. He heard himself being called by name – he was known and needed! He heard his name being called repeatedly that night and logically went to Eli each time to see how he could be of service.

Do you ever feel as though you want to be living your time in a way that feels more energizing and purposeful, but you haven't yet discovered what that way might be? I want to be clear – that energizing and purposeful way of living time might look active and outwardly engaged for one person and may look more like creative inaction for another (a shift toward introspection through mindfulness practices or new forms of rest). We would do well to carve out more time to be in those spaces we thought of earlier – our “thin places” where and when we sense the voice or company of God very present with us. Like Samuel, we can also follow Eli's guidance. After Samuel had heard someone calling him three times and obediently presented himself to Eli each time, we heard this in the reading:

“Then Eli perceived that God was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if God calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, God, for your servant is listening.’”

When I use the word affirmation in asking, ‘Will we receive and trust God’s affirmation?’ I mean a sense of being known, loved and needed. Samuel clearly felt affirmed in his role as an acolyte, assisting Eli with caring for the Temple. And Eli wisely invited Samuel to continue to listen for the something more to which God might call him. May each of us find time and space to sink deeply into the posture Samuel models for us, saying, *“Speak, God, for your servant is listening.”*

Let’s shift to our gospel story for today. I appreciate how our annual dive into the narrative of Jesus’ baptism aligns with the weekend on which our nation honors the life and work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Both John the Baptizer and the Rev. Dr. King preached with their lives and their words that the realization of God’s beloved community (a human community moored in love and justice) is possible – and that it is only possible through tremendous faith, honesty, and effort.

I have utilized the artwork we see on the front of our worship bulletin multiple years in a row. Each year, it moves me in a new way. This year, I appreciate the way in which John’s hand is very close to Jesus’ head yet seems to leave space for the Holy Spirit’s energy to move between them. And I appreciate how both men’s eyes are close in a relaxed way – conveying open, expectant spirits.

Let’s hear again the brief depiction of the moment of Jesus’ baptism: *“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him.*

And a voice came from the heavens, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Is not the spirit of affirmation palpable in that story? **I wonder: who in your life brings such palpable moments for you? Who in you life reminds you of your belovedness simply by the way they interact with you?** With whom does the Spirit show up – possibly not as a dove, possibly as a warm hug, a thoughtfully-timed kind word, a bowl of stew – something that says they see you and need to be in relationship with you? Who is that vessel of God’s affirmation of your belovedness? Be sure to tell them. We never know how much time there is. Today is a good time to tell those people how they bring us God’s affirming love.

I would like to close with a poem by Jan Richardson (a favorite poet of mine) – a poem to affirm us as we go about the rigorous work of being human. I invite you to set your intention for yourself to receive these words of affirmation. And I hope that they will resonate with you in a way that inspires you to share them as encouragement with another in your life who also needs it.

You may wish to close your eyes and rest your hands in an open posture (on your legs, next to you), ready to receive these words of affirmation of your belovedness. From a collection called *Circle of Grace*, “Beloved Is Where We Begin” by Jan Richardson.

If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing.

Do not leave
without hearing

who you are:

Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.

Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find
it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.
That is what
this journey is for.

I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear,
from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun
or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.

I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.

I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:

Beloved.
Beloved.
Beloved.

Friends, may we listen more quietly, receive more deeply, and trust more fully God's affirmation of our belovedness – because Love is counting on each of us. Amen.

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January 14, 2024 (2nd Sunday of Epiphany)
1 Samuel 3:1-10, Mark 1:4-11