

CALL AND RESPONSE

A Sermon by Rev. Glenda Hope
January 18, 2015



I Samuel 3:1-10

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, 'Samuel! Samuel!' and he said, 'Here I am!' and ran to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call; lie down again.' So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, 'Samuel!' Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call, my son; lie down again.' Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, 'Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."' So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'

John 1:43-49

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'

But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

LIKE MY FRIEND, VICTOR FLOYD, I GREW UP IN GEORGIA in a churchgoing family. He was a Methodist – I, a Southern Baptist – but like most Protestants we both experienced the Annual Revival Week!

We were yanked to attention by the Call/Response, which often began like this: ARE YOU READY? READY ARE YOU READY? READY READY? READY READY? READY ARE YOU READY FOR A MIRACLE?

By then, we were bouncing in our seats, and ready to hear God calling us in the sermon, the music, and the prayers. Or, we thought we were.

That Call came to Samuel, Philip, Nathanael, and Martin Luther King, Jr. “There was no vision” – it seemed God had been silent for so long. Could this truly be the voice of the Holy One calling – calling for a radical response a -response demanding the rest of one’s life ?

Samuel was a child. Philip was seeking the Messiah who would make everything right. Nathanael was also seeking that Messiah but he was a cynic and a bigot. Dr. King was barely out of seminary – a young Black man in a legally segregated society. These four had in common that they were ready because they were steeped in prayer, in worship, and in the Word of God.

In different ways the call came: “Follow me, for it is as you walk the Way that you become more and more ready to answer “yes”. Step by step the Miracle happens – your life is changed forever.

You might wonder why an elderly White Southerner was invited to preach in a service honoring Dr. King. I have always been White and Southern but I have not always been 79. In 1959, I was attending a Presbyterian seminary in Richmond, VA and participating in a young adult study group in a mostly African-American church. In Greensboro, NC, some students conducted a restaurant sit-in and one of the women in our group brought this to our collective attention. “oh, no,” said the pastor, “we can’t do that. We will have war in the streets.” That woman snapped back with gale-force passion: “Don’t we have war now? Don’t we have war in our souls?” She opened my eyes. Today, let us pray for God’s grace that we may all see the Black Lives Matter Movement through her eyes. Is God calling you to join the March tomorrow – and in days to come?

Picketing began in Richmond as a protest against racist practices of certain department stores. It was such a clear call and I was lucky enough to be in the right place, with the right people, at the right time. Literally, step by tentative step, the Miracle began happening – our lives were changing forever.

Did you know that Dr. King was only 26 years old when the call to lead a revolution came to him? To lead what we now know as the Montgomery bus boycott.

Of course, it was Rosa Parks who jumpstarted this movement, but did you know that she was a member of the Women’s Political Council which had called for changes on the public buses over a year before? Or, that two African-American girls merely 15 and 19 years old had previously been arrested for doing exactly what Parks later did? Movements for justice and healing of society don’t just spring up full blown. They build step by step – steps taken by individuals who hear the call of God and respond perhaps tentatively – maybe later with boldness.

So often I have heard people say: “What good does it do? I went to 3 marches. Wrote a ton of letters. Joined a group working for social change but nothing has changed.”

The Montgomery bus boycott persisted for 381 days. Hundreds of people – mostly poor people – got up before dawn to feed and dress their children, getting them off to school, before walking to work – often hard physical work – and walking home again. In drenching rain, freezing temperatures, scorching summers, carefully in groups for lone walkers were easy prey for prowling predators and some were brutally beaten. They didn’t know they were starting a movement. They knew they deserved respect from this bus company which depended on their money, they sensed that God was walking with them and they sang the songs of faith. A 73 year old woman – who walked for 381 days – said: “my soles are weary – but my soul is at rest. I’m doing this for my grandchildren.”

Dr. King’s home was firebombed and he told the crowd that gathered: “We are not hurt. Remember that if anything happens to me, there will be others to take my place.” Together there – in the darkness – they sang the songs of faith.

King continued answering “Ready!” as God led him for 13 years in a Movement continuing to this day. The more he followed the Way of Justice and Healing, the greater the vision given him and he perceived how poverty, racism, war, mass incarceration, inadequate education were all of a piece and who it is who profits from that. Friends in the Movement argued with him: “Your opposition to the war in Vietnam and support for the wage struggle of garbage collectors in Memphis are diversions – they will diffuse – defuse – our efforts” but God had shown Dr. King that all injustice is one and people of faith are called to do justice – not just act justly on an individual basis – but to make justice replace the structures now creating suffering whatever that is.

When the Safehouse for Women Escaping Prostitution was opened 17 years ago, it was a tiny piece of creating justice and healing. Somehow we knew: “PROSTITUTION IS THE OLDEST OPPRESSION.” As years went by and the stories piled up – incest, savage child abuse, poverty, exploitation of women, overburdened teachers, mental illness, mental retardation, unavailable mental and physical health care, imprisonment, and more, we began seeing the larger picture of injustice. Not every prostituted woman fits all those categories – SafeHouse has graduated women with post-graduate degrees. And women from upper middle class families. And women whose downward spiral began with prescription drugs in the family medicine cabinet until they found themselves trapped in “the Oldest Oppression”.

Women like Joyce who got into so much trouble – washed out in school – not knowing until she came to SafeHouse in her late 30’s that she needed eyeglasses. Or Linda who had it drummed into her that she was “fat and stupid – good only for the kitchen and the bedroom” – even as she climbed out her bedroom window to escape her drunken father. Or Frankie, who fought back against her stepfather and fled, knowing she could never return

to her home and her brutalized, broken-spirited mother. Or the veterans who joined the military to get an education only to be sexually assaulted by superior officers and cast aside by our nation. Or the 16 year old, who summoned the strength to steal all the money in the house, as well as the family car, and drive away into the unknown – away from the constant violence between her alcoholic parents which often spilled over to her.

Courageous women are facing down demons most of us cannot imagine and the Miracle is happening – their lives are being changed. It will be a lifelong struggle, just as our struggle for justice is lifelong – step by step.

Today, Safehouse graduates are health outreach workers, medical assistants, businesswomen, counselors, case managers, cooks, chefs, hospice volunteers, yoga teachers, artists, motivational speakers and more.

I have so many inspiring stories – invite your friends to brunch, lunch, coffee, tea, potluck and let me share these stories which might change your life – and let me ask your friends to share their talents and treasure with SafeHouse in the battle to overcome this oldest oppression.

Go to the website Prostitution Research and Education and learn how a renowned expert looks at the Keystone Pipeline and makes the connection between destruction of the environment, and destruction of women's lives and who profits from this. Another reason to become an activist for environmental justice.

Maybe God calls you in a different direction. Whatever it is, never work alone. Find allies. For instance, go to the website "Strengthen Social Security" and get the truth about this vital program, then join the effort to defeat those seeking to destroy it. It is mostly women with white hair who are waging this justice battle, fighting for our grandchildren and for the elderly poor.

Immerse yourself in prayer, worship and the Word of God, knowing whatever breaks your heart is God's way of calling you into action. ARE YOU READY?

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