

“The Dream: Yes We Can!” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey  
January 18, 2009 Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian Church

TEXT: 1 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 1:43-51 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!’ Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’ And he said to him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’

IN EVERY GENERATION God has raised up unlikely but trustworthy prophets whose words do not fall to the ground. That is to say, their words and their actions make a saving difference in the lives of people around them.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a prophet in our time. Like young Samuel in the Hebrew reading, he received an unexpected call to be a prophet in an unexpected way:

Martin was 27 years old, sitting in his kitchen in Montgomery Alabama.. He had received death threats and was trying to think of a face-saving way to leave his pastorate there. He thought about calling his father: Something inside of him said, "You can't call Daddy now. He's up in Atlanta, 175 miles away. You have to call on that something, that Being, that your Daddy told you about, this power that finds a way where there is none."

It was as though he realized he could not longer trade on his father's faith. He had to get to know God for myself. He began to pray aloud: “O Lord, I'm down here trying to do what is right.... The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength or courage, they too will falter. But I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left.”

In that moment of surrender, an inner voice started speaking : "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you even unto the end of the world." In that moment, King said he heard the voice of Jesus telling him to keep up the struggle. He felt God's presence as never before. His fears left him, and his uncertainty vanished. He later said that this was his first but formative inkling that suffering, taken up voluntarily, might have a transforming power.\*

It was this experience that Martin Luther King, Jr. drew upon years later when he delivered the landmark statement of civil rights in America. Toward the end of a short and somewhat formal recitation of the sufferings of African Americans, his friend Mahalia Jackson called out, "Tell them about your dream, Martin! Tell them about the dream!" Encouraged by shouts from the audience, King stopped looking at his notes. He began to speak about his dream of a nation and world without prejudice and division – a world that recognizes the dignity and sacred worth of all human beings, a world of justice and of peace, a vision reflecting the life and teachings of Jesus, a dream of God's kingdom come. "I have a dream!" he cried! "I have a dream."

I have been thinking of King's words as we prepare for the inauguration of the first black President of The United States of America. It will be a watershed moment in our history. A black man, whose father was from Kenya, will be moving into the White House, a house that was constructed by black African slaves.

I've heard several of my friends say "Rosa Parks sat so Martin Luther King could walk. Martin Luther King walked so Obama could run. Obama ran so we can all fly."

What does that mean to you? I've had three different meetings cancelled so that folks can hold all of Tuesday open for celebration! What is the promise that is making us all smile, that is summoning so many of us to gather to watch the inauguration? This is a man who, like Rev. King, uses words like struggle and sacrifice, who does not promise painless or quick solutions. This is a man who makes us want to dream again, want to believe again, even in the midst of war and financial crisis and political manipulation and social erosion.

I think that at least part of today's hope is the evidence that anything is possible, maybe even that everything is possible, that God is always redeeming the past and creating a future. And within that hope is the evidence that we are each a part of it. Every one of us not only has the potential but the power and the responsibility to make a difference. We are all called to take part. We are not on the sidelines, and we are not irrelevant.

Look at Samuel. This not just a lovely story about the trusting faith of a little boy. It's also the story of God beginning the replacement of a tired and disobedient line of priesthood with something new. Eli's family had been priests for a long time, with the priesthood being passed down from father to son. But Eli's two sons were corrupt priests. So God has decided to start a new era of priesthood through Samuel.

It is through the work of a naive young boy that Israel will become a kingdom, which it hasn't been so far. Samuel is the priest who finds and anoints Saul and later David when Saul fails to be the king God needs for his people. Samuel's story is a part of the Scripture's record of God's continuing work of creating. And it admonishes each of us, to be vigilant, to listen for God's call and be willing to answer, "Lord, your servant is listening."

Look at Nathanael. "What good can come out of Nazareth?" he sneers. He reflects the assumption that the Messiah would have to be someone special from someplace special. A part of the scandal of the incarnation is that the Son of God is a truly human being, who comes from the nothing-town of Nazareth...a town like the one you or I might come from. Nathanael the least likely is called by Jesus the least likely to be a Caller. "Come out from your fig tree and follow. Get into action!" Some commentators say the fig tree represents a place of study, the typical spot for rabbis to study Law. Some hold it as an eschatological reference, an OT symbol for the shelter of true Israelites in the age to come. Still others write it off as the place of sloth where Nathanael might have been napping or sleeping off a night's revelry. Whichever the reference, Jesus calls an unsuspecting person from under a fig tree and moves him out into the world.

These are stories of a God of impossibilities-turned-possible. This is a week of impossibilities-turned-possible. We have a God of impossibilities-turned-possible.

Could Dr. King have imagined the inauguration of Barack Obama 45 years ago? Hardly. All he wanted was for his children to drink from the same water fountain as others, to play at the same amusement parks, to have the same educational and employment opportunities.

Could we have imagined the eradication of smallpox or the disappearance of polio 50 years ago? Thirty years ago, one in eight children died in their first year of life; now half that proportion dies. Leprosy is in huge decline. AIDS currently presents a major health challenge, especially in Africa, but it is no longer an automatic death sentence.

A huge economic gap persists between the developed world and developing countries. But overall conditions in the developing world improved more in the second half of the 20th century than in the previous 500 years. The percentage of those living in absolute poverty has been cut almost in half and per capita income has risen 60 percent. Ten million entrepreneurs have improved their lives through microenterprise loans.

Politicians and preachers decry the decline of sexual morality in the United States. But the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that the teenage birthrate has declined by 30 percent in the last decade, while our abortion rate declined by almost half.

We have a God of impossibilities-turned-possible. A God of the dream.

At the end of the Gospel story, Jesus is speaking in the plural, to all his disciples, not just to Nathanael. Jesus says, "You will see much greater things than this." We will see more

than a human Jesus who speaks words of wisdom and does great works of healing. We will see heaven opened and God's angels coming up and down. We are meant to see the barriers between God and human beings totally broken down. God has a dream! And dreams do come true!

These passages reach out to us and ask us to open ourselves for God's calling, to be part of the dream. Like Samuel we might think that it is someone else. But listen to this reminder from the diary of Anne Frank, This young trapped and doomed girl wrote from her attic closet: "Everyone has inside of him a piece of good news. The good news is that you don't know how great you can be! How much you can love! What you can accomplish! And what your potential is!"

I still remember the words of Morgan Freeman playing God in the movie *Evan Almighty*. God explains how God works: not by zapping people to make them change -- but by providing opportunities for each person to grow, develop, change – chances to participate in the actions which will help their prayers become reality.

The future is not something you predict and wait for. It is something you invent daily through your actions: your actions, your unique and amazing and tiny every day actions. These passages invite us to participate and claim the hope of this week, not because God is on our side. But because as Abraham Lincoln put it, we are on God's side.

There is another beautiful sentence in Anne Frank's diary. She wrote "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

God is looking our way, seeing deeply into each of us, and saying "I will work through you." And if you can say, with Samuel, "your servant is listening," then you will you come out of the shadows and comfort of the fig tree with an immediacy and a vigor that will surprise you.

The passages remind us that in every way we can line up with a new president and a new hope; and that we can say, with full confidence and participation, "Yes we can." With God's help, Yes We Can.

Amen.

\*Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*