

“Speak, for Your Servant Is Listening”

Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder

United Church of Strafford, Vermont

January 14, 2024, Second Sunday after Epiphany & Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday

1 Samuel 3:1-10; Matthew 9:35-38

Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this Second Sunday after Epiphany and Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online.

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We share the belief that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and that our role is to honor and protect the creation, building a loving community that includes all.

Epiphany comes from a Greek word that means to reveal. During Epiphany we look for revelations of the light of the Spirit made manifest in Jesus and in the world. Today we are celebrating it in the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Central to King’s message, though, is that the light of God’s love is in us all. King said, “It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of [humanity].” King called us to create the realm of God’s love on earth, what he called “the beloved community.” Every time we gather we have the opportunity to do that. Please reach out today and extend your loving care to all who are with us, both in person and on Zoom. May everyone here feel held in the light of love ...

Call to Worship The quotes in the bulletin today say that we each have a calling, and imply what Dr. King called “the urgency of now.”

The *Times* editorial speaks of the urgency of the election of 2024. We may look at the leaders we have and wish they were more like Martin Luther King Jr., but we need to remember the wisdom of our late beloved neighbor and teacher, Bruce Nelson.

Bruce and Donna were regular members of our Martin Luhter King Jr. Sunday choir, and Bruce was a veteran of the Selma campaign of the Civil Rights Movement. Bruce would echo Ella Baker saying it was not Martin who made the movement, it was the movement that made Martin.

“Speak, for Your Servant Is Listening”

We may not have the leaders of our dreams, but if we each fulfill our calling in this fateful year, we will help make our leaders closer to our ideal, and make more likely the world we long for—a world where humans live in sustainable harmony with one another and with the planet—the world the Spirit is evolving humanity to create.

Today we will hear King and others urge us to do our part for this movement, but the essential thing is to hear the Spirit in our own heart, because your calling is uniquely related to your own gifts and opportunities and limitations. So let us worship together with our hearts and minds wide open to the Spirit.

“Speak, for Your Servant Is Listening”

The scripture passages speak to where we are today. We hear Jesus looking out at the world and saying essentially what the *New York Times* editorial in the bulletin says—this is a time not to sit out but to engage with the work the Spirit urgently needs done and is calling us to do.

We hear the story of Samuel being called by the Spirit, but not understanding, not sure who is calling or what it wants him to do. We can identify with that uncertainty. As Frederick Buechner says, “There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or...Self-Interest....” saying like Samuel, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

PBS has just started a new season of *All Creatures Great and Small*, the beloved autobiographical stories by the Yorkshire veterinary surgeon, James Herriot. World War II broke out at the end of the last season, and we saw James wrestle with how to respond. There was no question *that* he would respond, it was only a question of whether to enlist and serve in the army or to remain in England to help keep farms feeding the nation.

One of the striking things about World War II is how clear it was to everyone that they had to respond somehow—whether by enlisting or growing a victory garden or working in a factory or hosting refugees or even by being a conscientious objector protesting against the evil of war. Thomas Merton responded by entering a monastery and taking a vow of poverty so he would have no part in the oppressive possessiveness at the root of war.

One of the striking things about our time is that we have not seen anything like the kind of response that took place in World War II, although the many national and global crises we face

are arguably even more threatening and urgent. We can still hear Greta Thunberg and millions of other young people crying “Fire!” at the climate emergency, and we know the situation grows worse every day. We see the horror of the wars in Gaza and Ukraine. We witness the blatant anti-democratic plans and the vows of retribution made by leading candidates in this election year. Yet where are the recruitment centers, where are the long lines of people signing up to enlist to contribute however they can?

We do not have time to ask why there has not been a universal response to today’s polycrisis, nor do we have time to feel guilty that we have not responded with our all. Jesus and countless other urgent voices like Dr. King are calling us to rise and act today. We need to rise trusting that others will be inspired by what we do and will rise with us. We need to rise trusting also the wisdom of Margaret Mead, who said “Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

We all are called, to rise to this moment. As the best-selling writer Richard Bach put it, “Here is the test to find whether your mission on Earth is finished: if you’re alive, it isn’t.”

Henri Nouwen agrees with Bach. He writes in his beautiful and useful book, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*, “Each of us has a mission in life.”

Nouwen quotes Jesus praying, “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” Nouwen says, “We seldom fully realize that we are sent to fulfill God-given tasks.... We act as if we were simply dropped down in creation and have to decide how to entertain ourselves until we die. But we were sent into the world by God, just as Jesus was. Once we start living our lives with that conviction, we will soon know what we were sent to do.”

This congregation has many different ideas of who or what God is, but if there is a Spirit of life and love that sparked the first cells into being and inspired evolution at every stage and is still evolving human consciousness today, then surely that Spirit is calling everything it created, including every one of us, to help life on earth survive and thrive. And even if life has no Spirit moving through it, we each are called by basic human decency and compassion to ease or prevent the suffering that we can by acting now. The old bumper sticker says “If you are not outraged, you are not paying attention.” Today, if you do not feel called to act, you are not paying attention. But to be sure exactly what you are called to do in this urgent moment requires a deeper level of attention.

The spiritual teacher, Parker Palmer, says, “Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.”

Henri Nouwen says, “‘What does God want from me?’ is a question we all ask, not once and for all but throughout our lives.... What I tell others who ask these questions...is this: ‘God has a very special role for you to fulfill. God wants you to stay close to his heart and to let him guide you. You will know what you are called to do when you have to know it.’ New vocations are full of promise. Something very important is in store for us. There is a hidden treasure to discover.”

Nouwen says that the key to knowing our calling in any given moment is to recognize that our overarching calling is to live and move and have our being in the Spirit. If we keep returning in our hearts and minds through spiritual practice to the deepest connection to the Spirit within us and deeply listen, we will be able to discern our callings moment to moment throughout our lives.

Nouwen experienced this first hand, as his book on discernment describes in detail. He discovered, “I can be with anyone at any place and enjoy the goodness, beauty and love I see while remaining at home with my God, who sent me into the world to speak and act...”

This is crucial for us to see, because it is so easy to get discouraged by the crises unfolding around us, and by the limitations to our own ability to respond. Spiritually grounded discernment helps us live from a place that is always at home in goodness, beauty and love, no matter what is happening in our struggles and in the world.

So how can we discern what we need to do right now in this fateful year? One section of Nouwen’s book is entitled, “Discerning Guidance in Books, Nature, People and Events.” Those are the classic places where we can look to find our calling clarified. What does our spiritual reading say, whatever books or articles or passages or poems speak to us? What do we hear when we go into nature and let go of our busy thinking and are attentive in solitude? What do our trusted friends or counselors say when we talk over the question of our calling? And what do the signs of the times say to us, what events speak to us most urgently or clearly?

Nouwen suggests having a conversation with the different voices within us that say do this or that or nothing. He recommends journaling to help us sort them out and discern which are speaking from our heart’s core. He also suggests looking at our gifts and opportunities and at the same time our limitations, like frail health or other commitments. How can we make the calling

we hear from the Spirit work within our current condition? He suggests trying it out and seeing how it feels, and if it is not quite right, adjusting what we do.

In a few minutes I will invite you to share your experience and wisdom that could be useful to us all as we try to discern what our calling is. But first, here is more of Frederick Buechner's insight:

“The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing TV deodorant commercials, the chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren't helping your patients much either.”

Buechner concludes:

“Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”

Let us become centered in that place within us where we find the Spirit whispering or moving or waiting, and let us simply be wide open and attentive, inviting it to show us our next step, saying like Samuel, “Speak, for I am listening...”

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

There's a mourning dove
waiting her turn while a blue jay
pecks at the corn.