



***A sermon preached by The Right Reverend Thomas J. Brown, Bishop of Maine to the Episcopal Diocese of Maine for the service of the Second Sunday after Epiphany
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In his inauguration speech, the 20th president of United States James Garfield said there are men and women who make the world better just by being the kind of people they are. They have the gifts of kindness or courage or loyalty or integrity. It really matters very little whether they are behind the wheel of a truck, or running a business, or bringing up a family. They teach the truth by living it.

President Garfield died in September of 1881 from an infection following a gunshot wound. In his inaugural words a sesquicentennial ago about kindness, courage, loyalty, integrity - how their gifts echo right now as we look into this week. Take your pick - any one of these, if we embody and offer it, would reflect the nature, person, work, and ministry of Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

We've gathered online today to worship the living God. I'll be brutally frank, worshiping God like this doesn't come easily for me. There are times when online worship feels like a meeting more than it does giving praise and glory to God. But, like everything else that's new, I'm learning and adapting along with you. And if I desire to give thanks and glory to God, well, then the desire is transformed very often into reality. In our gathering online, we yearn to see and experience the living God. We want something from this less than an hour to equip us for the next several days. To grasp onto hope, strengthen our resolve, sooth our wounds, and empower our witness.

What Andree just read from the third chapter of 1 Samuel begins with this phrase: "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." God's silence seemed unending, but the young Samuel had witnessed all sorts of brokenness much of it right there in the temple. The temple immediately before this third chapter we read about how Eli's sons took advantage of their positions. They ate the sacrifices that were meant for God, they forced themselves on women who came to the temple, they exploited whatever and whomever they chose. And even when Eli found out about it and tried to stop their abuses of the priestly office, his sons refused and showed no respect for their father's authority.

This is the context out of which our story for today emerges. In short, Israel is in a state of spiritual desolation: religious and political corruption and social upheaval. So given all that, surely Samuel was at least a little aware of the exhausted and lifeless reality draped all around him. Even strewn about in the temple. After all, the word of the Lord was rare in those days, visions were not widespread. We don't know the reasons that God chose Samuel, but consider the possibility that Samuel had the capacity not only to speak about God but also to listen to God.

Bear in mind that God's vision comes *after* Samuel expressed willingness to listen. It's not until the third time that Samuel returns to Eli's room that Eli starts to wake up to what might be happening. It must be the Lord. So Eli tells him, if God calls you again this time stay there be ready and willing to listen. For me this is one of the most moving parts of the story. A shift of power occurs and a partnership emerges, and a respect for Eli goes deeper because Samuel will soon inform Eli that because of the abusiveness of his sons, Eli's ministry shall end. Yet those words of judgment must also be heard. God forges a new creation out of the rubble of the old, but first we pause in the night, with Eli and Samuel in their confusion, waiting for God and saying "speak, for your servant is listening." After all even though the word of the Lord was rare in those days and visions were not widespread, God was not done with God's people.

God is not done with us, either. If we take today's word as a call to live as a collective - Samuel sitting on the edge of our beds and saying, "Speak God, for we are listening." We'll cultivate a spirit of expectant listening.

Tomorrow our nation will keep the tradition of remembering and honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. When Dr. King wrote to the church leaders who weren't sure of the risk that they'd have to take, he said, "Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless effort of men and women willing to be coworkers with God." And quoting President Garfield, Dr. King said, "Let us teach the truth by living it." It's got to take shape and form somehow in each of us.

Will you pray every hour that you're awake this week? Will you seek out the person who you know holds a very different viewpoint from yours and listen? For real? Will you be prophetic? Peacefully witness against corruption, or call on your congressional delegation to join us in teaching the truth by living it. Even in the days when the word of the Lord may seem rare and visions not widespread, we the people of God, called to be the Episcopal Diocese of Maine are willing to say, "Speak Lord, for your servants are listening." May it be so, in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.