

June 3, 2018
Second Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 4, Year B, RCL
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20)
Psalm 139: 1-5, 12-17
2 Corinthians 4:5-12
Mark 2:23-3:6

We didn't hear a reading today from the Book of Revelation, but I kind of wish we had. The word "revelation" has been on my mind this week. It first popped into my mind on Tuesday afternoon. At the time, I was chatting with an acquaintance about the latest crummy stuff in the news. She mentioned how hard it is to keep taking it all in. She mentioned her friends saying to her, "Don't turn away." She mentioned how hard it is to keep looking.

The news-borne outrages are arriving with heart-breaking frequency: stories about men who have abused their power over girls and young women; stories about the various ways in which white people aggress others for simply "living while black"; stories about increasing poverty and decreasing odds of escaping it.

Perhaps making it more distressing is the change in our public discourse: the rhetoric of decency and compassion is no longer required. Before lamenting this particular devolvement, consider this: we're learning about things that been going on for a very long time. Sometimes decency and compassion are *only* rhetoric, and when that's the case, we're better off knowing the truth.

In the American social contract, there are massive disconnects between our stated values and the lived experience of so very many people. To repair those disconnects, we first must be aware of their existence.

The Book of Revelation is not *prediction*, despite what regressive Christians might say. Rather than prediction, it's *prophecy*. That is, it's a *revealing* of the injustices of the day, and a *warning* about what is likely to happen if things don't change.

Today we didn't get Revelation. But we did get the prophet Samuel.

This is one those Sundays when we really need to read beyond the assignment. Let's set the stage. The Book of First Samuel begins with the childless Hannah praying for a son. God grants her request, and she dedicates firstborn Samuel to God's service. Meanwhile, the priest Eli has ceded his authority to his sons, whom our translation describes as "scoundrels."¹ With their actions, they have abused the people and corrupted the priesthood.

In the part we heard today, Samuel is in the Temple, at the Ark of the Covenant. Which is to say, he is at the holiest location for the Hebrew people, a place more hallowed than we can really imagine. God calls out to Samuel. After three false starts, and with some help from Eli, Samuel gets it together, saying: "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Read past today's part, and this happens: In textbook prophetic fashion, God speaks through Samuel, both to reveal and to warn. In this case, the warning is not what *might* happen, but is instead what *will* happen. God says, in paraphrase: the house of Eli is coming down, and there is no way to stop it. God's window of opportunity has closed. For Eli and his family, it's too late. It is on poor Samuel to convey this information to Eli. Eli responds with acceptance.

Imagine this fairly common scenario: your house has a plumbing leak, but you don't know it. It sits there, dripping away, getting worse, causing damage that is sometimes extensive, and yet surprisingly well hidden. To correct the leak, you have to repair it at the source. But before you can begin the repair, you have to realize that there is a leak. That moment of discovery can feel pretty bad at first, but later we realize just how lucky we were to catch the problem when we did.

It seems to me that our nation is experiencing a period of colossal revelation. From the edifices that symbolize America, layers of false façade are falling away—even being torn away—revealing the true rot that lies behind. In the face of discouragement, remember this: exposing the rot is the first step in its repair.

It's not too late. Like Samuel, we have to listen, and we have to keep listening, so that we can hear God speaking.

Moments of revelation *are* hard. Things seen cannot be unseen. But *turning away* is a privilege denied the people most directly harmed. When we listen to God speak to us about injustice, we reject that privilege in favor of truth and solidarity. And besides, as the prophets would tell us, all life is ultimately connected to all other life; harm to part causes harm to all.

Today, we remind one another of this: God *is* revealing the truth, and that process of revealing is *always* a *good thing*. Yes, it's hard. And that's one of the many reasons we need the company of one another in a supportive community of faith.

This month's Smithsonian magazine includes a spread of current photographs of women who as girls participated in desegregating public schools in the South.² A couple of those women were the first black students at Baton Rouge High School in my hometown. The women profiled have accomplished amazing things in their lives. Their photos reminded me of this: even when you get discouraged, keep looking, because you will see the face of courage.

Assaults on women and assaults on black people and assaults on immigrant children seem to have at least one thing in common: they are assaults on a *body*, disregarding that body's fullness as a *human being*. This seems to be true wherever the incident rests on the scale from minute to huge, from small indignity to major abuse. Each incident is therefore both arbitrarily *impersonal*, and devastatingly *personal*.

In the rush of crummy news, sometimes detailing events on a massive scale, we must remember that God always calls to our attention the *personal*. God made *every body* a *human being*, a *human being* created in perfect fullness, with love and generosity, and for the joy of abundant life.

To see that, sometimes we need an up-close reminder, and today God is giving us one. In a few minutes, we will baptize Evelyn Tamar Say. We don't know much about her right now; the particularities that will make her the one and only one of her have not yet been revealed. But we know this: She is an embodied human being whom God has entrusted to *us*. *She* is *our* child. She is a reminder that *every* child is *our* child.

In these hard times of revelation, keep listening, and keep looking. The world that God desires for us—the world that *we* desire in our heart of hearts—will never be attained by turning away. When it gets hard, remember this day, remember Evie's baptism, and remember this: it's a lot harder for rot to grow in the sunlight. Therefore, on the bad days, while you *grieve* the rot, also *rejoice* in its revelation.

And so let us say to God with *gladness*, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Notes

¹ 1 Samuel 2:12, NRSV.

² "The Defiant Ones," photographs by Lola Flash, text by Amy Crawford, *Smithsonian*, June 2018, 42-51.