

Are We Listening?

Psalm 139 and Samuel 3:1-20

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Psalm 139

LORD, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.

You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.

You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,"

even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

I try to count them--they are more than the sand; I come to the end--I am still with you.

O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me--

those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you for evil!

Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?

I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.

See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

I Samuel 3:1-20

3:1 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.

3:2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room;

3:3 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.

3:4 Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!"

3:5 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.

3:6 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."

3:7 Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

3:8 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.

3:9 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.

3:10 Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

3:11 Then the LORD said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.

3:12 On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end.

3:13 For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them.

3:14 Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever."

3:15 Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli.

3:16 But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am."

3:17 Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you."

3:18 So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him."

3:19 As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

3:20 And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.



In 1995, my ex-husband died of cancer. We had spent the previous seven months sharing a house with our 3 kids and his sister. It was an intense time. A couple of months after Don died I went to the doctor for something minor. When Dr Holmes asked me how I was doing, I burst into tears and cried for a long, long time. While I cried, he didn't say anything and he didn't do anything to hurry me along. He just let me cry. That experience was profoundly good medicine for me. It was healing. Dr Holmes let me share with him the most important thing in my life at that time – my exhaustion, grief, relief, sorrow, joy. He let me be known and cared for. That period in my life after Don died, though I didn't know it then, was an incubator period for the possibility of ministry for me. Dr Holmes, a complete stranger to me, let me be who I truly was in that moment. That was love. That supported me to nurse myself back to vitality, and on to a widening horizon.

We are wonderfully made, the psalmist said, and when we are present to being known, to being loved for who we are, we cannot help but share the grace of life with one another. We are wonderfully made. And, we are made for each other.

MLK Jr's boyhood experiences reflect both of today's scriptures. He was known and loved as the psalmist described, and he learned to listen for the voice of God, as Samuel does. Browsing on the web this week about King, I was reminded of stories I'd heard. Of how beloved he was in Daddy King's church community in Atlanta... where as a young child he was insulated from the harshest impacts of racism. He knew he was loved. He knew he was gifted, and he knew he was equal to whites. He knew how he deserved to be treated.

Like the priest Eli tutoring the boy Samuel in listening for God's voice, MLK Sr. tutored young Martin to stand in his own dignity. There was the time his father took him to a shoe store, and when told by the clerk they must move to the rear of the store to be served, he stalked out, saying, "We'll either buy shoes sitting *here* or we won't buy any shoes at all."

Another time the senior King was stopped by a traffic policeman who addressed him as "boy." He pointed to Martin on the seat beside him and snapped, "That's a boy. I'm a man." With such blessed assurance and the training to grant dignity to all people, not only did MLK Jr. go on to catalyze the civil rights movement, but, like Samuel, he put the hard word on us, his words still prophetic today.

I will share at some length part of King's speech at Riverside Church in New York in 1967, exactly one year to the day before he was assassinated. King, like Samuel, plays the prophet by denouncing evil and declaring how God wants to put the world, and us, right again. You could change some of the names in this speech to match the present circumstances.

"To me the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me why I am speaking against the war. Could it be that they do not know that the good news was meant for all ... ~~men~~ -- for Communist and capitalist, for their children and ours, for black and for white, for revolutionary and conservative? Have they forgotten that my ministry is in obedience to the one who loved his enemies so fully that he died for them? What then can I say to the "Vietcong" or to Castro or to Mao ... Can I threaten them with death or must I not share with them my life? In 1962 John F. Kennedy said, "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable." Increasingly, by choice or by accident, this is the role our nation has taken -- ... the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investment.

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. ... When ... profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered. ... A true revolution of values will .. cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies... A true revolution of values will .. look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to (humanity) ~~mankind~~ as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies. This call ... is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all (people) ~~men~~. When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental , weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life ... (It) has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of (humanity) ~~man~~.

This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John:

Let us love one another; for love is God & everyone that loveth is born of God & knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. If we love one another God dwelleth in us, & his love is perfected in us.

Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter -- but beautiful -- struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the (children) ~~sons~~ of God, and our brothers (and sisters) wait eagerly for our response. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard? Will our message be that the forces of American life militate against their arrival as full human beings, and we send our deepest regrets? Or will there be another message, of longing, of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their cause, whatever the cost? The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise, we must choose in this crucial moment of human history."

Speaking 42 years ago, King, is still speaking to us—though we now call different people our enemies. He is calling us to be true to who we are, beloved children of God, baptized to follow the path of Love. He is calling us to be one human family. We are all loved. We are all gifted. We all deserve dignity. We don't always (or even very often) remember that. Our stories of "not enoughness"

or “it’s all their fault” create static between us and the voice of God, telling us—You are my beloved child—in you I am well pleased. When we say, which I am very tempted to do, oh, I can’t be like Jesus. I can’t be like MLK—it’s just a way to get myself off the hook for sharing my gifts with the world. I’m grateful my doctor, Dr. Holmes was true to his call. We are all called to give our gifts, with all our awesome flaws, to the world around us.

Another modern prophet, Desmond Tutu, echoes the words of the psalmist... how wonderfully made we are... and reminds us that it’s our calling to make the world work for everyone... *Human beings are actually created for the transcendent, for the sublime, for the beautiful, for the truthful, and you don’t teach people these things. It comes with the package of being human, and all of us are given the task of trying to make this world a little more hospitable to these beautiful things – to love, to compassion, to caring, to sharing, just to being human.*

May God bless us in our listening. Amen!



Children’s Time: A play

Samuel was a young boy who lived with the priest Eli in the temple of God, where Samuel was learning to live in service to God. He slept in the inner sanctuary where the shrine of God was kept. One night Samuel lay sleeping and he woke hearing a voice say,

God: Samuel! Samuel!

Samuel: Here I am!

Narrator: And he ran to Eli saying,

Samuel: Here I am, for you called me!

Eli: I did not call; go back to bed.

Narrator: So he went and laid down, and then God called again

God: Samuel!

Samuel: Here I am, for you called me.

Eli: I did not call my son; go back to bed.

Narrator: Now Samuel did not yet recognize it when God was talking to him and God called Samuel again, a third time.

God: Samuel!

Samuel: Here I am, for you called me.

Narrator: And Eli recognized that God was calling the boy. So Eli said to Samuel,

Eli: Go lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.

Narrator: So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now God came and stood there calling as before,

God: Samuel! Samuel!

Samuel: Speak! For your servant is listening!

Narrator: Samuel went on to be an important prophet who listened to God and told what he said to the people.