

**Sermon for January 18, 2015 (Epiphany 2, Year B)**  
**Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: 1 Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139; John 1:43-52

Title: Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening

Eli said to the young boy, Samuel, "Go, lie down; and If God calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening'" (1 Samuel 3:9).

My dear friends: will you follow the wise counsel of Eli?

Will you be open and receptive enough to live in that continual state of mind which says, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening"?

Thursday, January 15, was the 86<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr. As you all know, our nation will pause tomorrow to remember his life and to celebrate his legacy.

*(All information on Dr. King below is taken from A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. edited by James M. Washington, HarperCollins Publishers, 1986, page numbers referenced).*

Perhaps you already know this, but Dr. King grew up in a rather comfortable household. His early life was full of personal successes and accomplishments. Loving parents ensured that he was given an excellent education, all the way through his PhD from Boston University in 1955. His intellectual prowess was evident to all and he received numerous accolades along the way. (P. 508-509).

His entire experience of life changed drastically, however, soon after he accepted the call to serve as the Pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in the heart of Montgomery, Alabama.

When the struggle for equal access to the bus system in that city began with the arrest of Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955, Dr. King's life changed forever.

All of a sudden, the telephone at the church parsonage was called by frightened and angry people who spoke threats of violence against Dr. King and his family.

And the church mailbox began to receive regular letters which promised horrific violence against the leader of this protest movement.

Never in his life had Dr. King felt this kind of fear and terror, and it truly shook him to his core.

After one long and arduous day in the bus boycott protests in 1956, Dr. King was attempting to sleep when the telephone rang. The voice on the other end spoke words of evil and hatred.

“Listen, nigger, we’ve taken all we want from you. Before next week, you’ll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery.”

He hung up quickly, but the soul damage was already done.

How could he get those piercing words out of his mind? Coretta was asleep. So he went into the kitchen, made a pot of coffee, and right then and there he gave up.

Just about midnight, in the parsonage kitchen, Dr. King gave up.

How could this be God’s will? How could he face such hatred and malice?

How could he risk the well-being of his wife and their baby girl, Yolanda?

And how could he lead this mass movement of people who looked to him for strength and courage while he himself was inwardly crippled by fear and anxiety?

Dr. King spoke then to the Lord and said, “I am afraid. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I can’t face this alone.”

Do you know what happened next?

Well, what do you think? Do you think God left him to face that struggle alone?

HA! Of course not!

At that moment, as Dr. King explained himself many times, he experienced the sudden presence of God unlike any other time in his life. There was nothing external, but there was a sense of POWER and PRESENCE on the inside of him that surely came from somewhere else.

And THESE words were pressed firmly into his consciousness, far deeper than those malevolent words spoken earlier on the phone. GOD spoke to him and said, “Stand up for righteousness. Stand up for truth. I will be at your side forever.”

The threats only intensified over time. Three nights later, in fact, their home – the Baptist church parsonage – was bombed by white men afraid of change.

But they were too late. Nothing could touch him now. Nothing would turn him around. God had spoken and given Dr. King a “new strength and [new] trust” (p.509) which allowed him to face any challenge, any adversity, with that peace which passes understanding.

To be clear, things did not become easier after God spoke to him. The struggle intensified and there were days when his spirit faltered.

One Monday evening in 1956, Dr. King addressed a meeting of the Montgomery Improvement Association. The preceding few days had been very difficult. Members of his group were being arrested and the threats against Dr. King and his family were relentless. When he spoke on this particular night, his attempts to encourage and strengthen the protesters were carefully masking his own inner anxiety and discouragement. (cf P. 517).

At that end of that meeting, Mother Pollard came to the front of the church and approached Dr. King.

Mother Pollard was one of the elderly women who faithfully participated in the bus protest in Montgomery throughout 1955 and '56. She was entirely poor and uneducated, but she was quite intelligent and intuitively smart. After several weeks of protesting the bus system and therefore walking to do her work throughout the city, Mother Pollard was asked if she was tired. She famously responded by saying, “My feets is tired, but my soul is rested.”

On this Monday night, she came over to Dr. King and said, “Come here, son.” He obeyed, striding over and giving her a big, affectionate hug. “Something is wrong with you,” Mother Pollard said. “You didn’t talk strong tonight.”

He tried to disguise it and maintain the veneer by saying, “Oh no, Mother Pollard, nothing is wrong. I’m feeling as fine as ever.”

She wasn’t having it though. “You can’t fool me,” she said. “I knows something is wrong. Is it that we ain’t doing things to please you? Or is it that the white folks is bothering you?” And before Dr. King could respond, she went deeper.

She came right into his face, looked him straight in the eye and said, “I don’t told you we is with you all the way.” And then with a sudden light in her eyes and confidence in her voice, she told Dr. King, “But even if we ain’t with you, God’s gonna take care of you.”

Those words struck him deep. It was the Holy Spirit speaking through Mother Pollard. It was the word of the Lord speaking to Dr. King, and he later reported that he never forgot those words of Mother Pollard on that night. They were forever written on his heart.

My friends, no one asks to be prophet. No one asks to be an apostle.

If EVER you meet someone who IS seeking to be a spokesperson for God, then you can be fairly certain that you’re in the presence of one who is mentally unstable!

No one asks to be a chosen servant of the Lord.

The boy Samuel did not ask for God to speak to him. He thought that he was only helping the old man Eli to carry his books and keep the lamps lit.

Nathanael did not ask to be called as an apostle. He was probably on his way to go fishing when Philip came and found him.

Dr. King did not ask to be the trumpet of conscience to our nation. He went to Montgomery only to be a preacher, to be a faithful pastor to a congregation of Christ-loving people much like we are here this morning.

Mother Pollard did not intend to be the voice of the Holy Spirit on that Monday night. She was just trying to encourage a young man who was struggling.

None of us know when or where or when God might call to us.

We live our lives, just doing what we do each day. Most of life seems pretty uneventful, unremarkable.

We have no idea at what moment we might be called upon to speak for God.

That's OK, because God knows, and God is working out plans and dreams which we cannot imagine.

And we don't need to know. But when God calls, when God shows up, we need to be open and ready and say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

THAT'S IT! That's the entire message.

That's the one thing that I could stand up here and say to you every single week!  
Be prepared! Be open! Be receptive!

You might be the next Samuel, the next Nathanael!  
You might be the next Mother Pollard speaking words of hope!  
You might even stand up, like Dr. King, for truth and justice, in your own way.

God only knows. All that you and I can do is be open and ready.  
"Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Will you do it? Will you be open and ready to listen?

Why not? Because, after all, it is the same promise that is given to the prophet, to the apostle, to Dr. King ... AND to you and to me:

**Stand up for righteousness! Stand up for truth! And God will be at your side forever.**

Hallelujah! Amen!