

January 18, 2015
Falcon Heights Church, UCC
Falcon Heights, MN
The Rev. Anne Swallow Gillis

MLKing, Jr. Sunday
John 1:43-51
I Samuel 3:1-20
Epiphany 2B

NEW OCCASIONS, NEW DUTIES

(Sermon framed by singing of “Once to Every Man and Nation”)

“Once to every man and nation.” Once to every woman and nation, I would add. In spite of its gender-exclusive title, this hymn by James Russell Lowell never fails to stir and challenge me. A 19th century poet, editor and diplomat, Lowell was the son of a Congregational minister. Lowell was also an active abolitionist, working with his wife, Maria White, in the New England anti-slavery movement. Our hymn is part of a longer poem called “The Present Crisis,” which Lowell published in Boston in 1845 as a protest against U.S. involvement in the war with Mexico. Lowell was convinced that land added to Texas would only increase the territory of permitted enslavement of certain humans. After a portion of the poem was set to music, it was often sung in many New England Congregational churches, which felt called to anti-slavery work. “Once to every man, woman and nation, comes the moment to decide, in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side.” These denominational ancestors of our United Church of Christ believed that the then prevailing “truth” of black people’s inherent inferiority to white people was a “falsehood.” For them, “time (had truly) made ancient good uncouth.”

The tone of the hymn is somber, even gruesome at times: we walk a path “by light of burning martyrs,” tracking “Jesus’ bleeding feet.” Yet, I experience an odd mixture of feeling both chastened and hopeful as I sing the words, challenged again and again by the phrase, “New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth.”

As a nation, we are at an interesting confluence of “new occasions” this week, and I find myself wondering: what “new duties” are being revealed to us as disciples of Jesus? Tomorrow, our nation will again have the opportunity to reflect on the prophetic life and ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. If we pause and listen, we might be challenged to focus again on the realities of poverty, racism and war that Dr. King so boldly preached about in the 1960s, and that continue to plague our life together. We are still in the tender aftermath of the contested police shootings of African Americans that have sent thousands of citizens out into our city streets in protest and sharply divided our nation. We wade through more uproar about our criminal justice system, negative public discourse and life together as a sharply polarized nation. We might find ourselves thinking about the healing and reconciliation, the “new duties,” that need to unfold for our country to be whole. What is the new occasion we find ourselves in as a nation, as a region, community here in the Twin Cities metro area in early 2015?

Over and over in the Bible we hear stories of people being called out of one situation into something new. New surroundings, new duties, new challenges, new futures. This seems to be God's way with humans, but I think we often find such calls surprising, unsettling, even confusing. The account in First Samuel describes the call of young Samuel who thinks the voice speaking out to him in the night is that of Temple his mentor, the priest Eli. It is a time in Israel's history when there was great debate about whether or not they should have a king to rule over them. For years, the judges and the priests had mediated between the people and God, guiding the Israelites in relative equality and stability. But the young nation had ongoing problems with neighboring people (many of whose lands they were now occupying) and they wanted protection from their enemies. For the sake of national security they wanted a king who would rule under God's rule, and also gather standing armies to protect them. Others worried that a monarchy would make them be like all other nations, with military conscription, a sharper division between rich and poor, heavy tax burdens and oppression from power-hungry human rulers. Unknown to Samuel at the time of his call, God will eventually guide him to choose Israel's first king, Saul. And Samuel would become the first in a long line of prophets who will be called upon to speak God's truth to these future kings.

Samuel is only about 12 years old when God calls him, but when Samuel finally figures out who is trying to get his attention in the middle of the night, he manages to sputter: "Speak, for your servant is listening." God entrusts Samuel with the difficult task of speaking truth to power right from the beginning. He will have to speak words of judgment and accountability, about Eli's sons' transgressions as a priestly family: how they would keep the choice parts of the sacrificed meat for themselves and abuse poor women who came to the house of worship in dire need. He will have to challenge future kings to care for the poor and the marginalized within their realm.

I recently came across an account of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, which he delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Apparently, the singer Mahalia Jackson had called out to him with the words: "Tell them about the dream, Martin." Dr. King proceeded to move away from his prepared notes to speak of his dream of a different world for all of God's people. As we again approach the commemoration of Dr. King's ministry tomorrow, we might wonder about the things that can either constrict or encourage our dreaming and imagining a new future to which God calls us.

When Jesus approached people at the beginning of his ministry, it does not appear that he had much to offer them. There was no game plan beyond experiencing that the Kingdom of God was at hand. Something about Jesus, his demeanor, his teachings, allowed people to let go of predictability and certainty. When he said, "Follow me," they went with him. These people were not told: "Change this about yourself," but simply "Follow me." Somehow, Jesus knew

these people. Somehow, God knew Samuel. Somehow, other people are inspired by God and seem to know us and challenge us to dream new dreams about our future. Has someone known you and called you out to envision a new call in your life? Are you able to do this for someone else, perhaps someone whose vision, whose dreams need widening?

“Come and see,” Jesus said in the preceding verses when several of John the Baptist’s followers came over to investigate what Jesus was doing. “Come and see,” says Philip as he invites Nathaniel to join them. The words are better translated: “Come and *experience*.” What is Jesus inviting them to experience? God’s reign, where the first shall be last and the last shall be first, is at hand. Where the poor will be fed and the captives released and the blind will see and the lame walk.

I remember being a young and politically naïve high school student living in suburban Washington, D.C., the spring Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. The civil rights movement was an occasional topic of discussion in my family and my United Church of Christ congregation. But neither my high school social studies classes, nor my peers nor I were paying attention to a sanitation strike in Memphis, Tennessee. What I remember so vividly from that difficult time, and the grief, violence and destruction that followed, was a phone conversation with a friend the night Dr. King was killed. Since my friend’s father was an FBI agent working for J. Edgar Hoover at the time, in keeping with his father’s views, my friend insisted that the assassination was a good thing as King was probably a Communist. My education in the more subtle and persistent forms of racial tension was just beginning.

Years later, I read part of Dr. King’s 1963 letter to uninvolved white clergy in the South, appealing for their active support of the civil rights movement: “We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.” I began to learn that my inherited whiteness had given me certain advantages and privilege throughout my life that I had never really recognized. As a follower of Jesus, my ongoing personal challenge has been how to use this “currency,” this unearned power and privilege, to work to help heal racial injustice. If you would like to join me in some more conversation about this, a small group of us will be meeting starting this Thursday evening. (More information in your bulletin.)

“New occasions bring new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth. Standeth God within the shadow keeping watch above his own.” This God of ours not only keeps watch, but also continually tries to get our attention. This God is calling each of us to new duties, as we become transformed by the presence of the Spirit of the Risen Jesus in our lives. What new visions and new calls will emerge for each of us in these coming months? For this congregation? Let’s be in conversation together. “Come and see,” says Jesus. Amen.