

Here I Am, Lord

First Congregational Church Branford

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1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51

Rev. Suzanne Personette

Listen to the prophet Samuel's call story...

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.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the 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. ⁴Then the Lord called, 'Samuel! Samuel!'^{*} and he said, 'Here I am!' ⁵and 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. ⁶The 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.' ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸The 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. ⁹Therefore 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.

¹⁰ Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'

We come to this next scripture in the middle of Jesus calling together his first disciples:

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.'⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.

⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.'

⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' ⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.'⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' ⁵⁰ Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you

that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’⁵¹ And he said to him, ‘Very truly, I tell you,* you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’

The word of God for the people of God.

I’m going to share some ways in which some folks have been called by God to be the light of the world, and I thought you could consider your own call, and see if by the end you want to say, *Here I am, Lord*.

It’s interesting to note that Jesus called fishermen. It’s believed that at least 7 of the 12 were fishermen. It’s been speculated that the reason Jesus chose them was because they weren’t the boss, the leader, or the priest! They’d have more of a willingness to *follow*, to learn. Also, fishermen exhibit patience, determination, instinct, *and* would be able to be away for long stretches of time.

But, Nathanael is skeptical about Jesus. He asked Philip if anything good can come out of Nazareth! That would’ve been a very funny line to the first audiences to hear or read. The comment may have had to do with local rivalries - or, it could’ve just had to do with small-town origins - like, how could anything good, anything of value come out of Branford!

Nathanael wonders how Jesus would know him and Jesus points out that he sees and knows more about people than what’s on the surface... There’s our epiphany this week - a sign of God’s presence. *Jesus knew him*. That’s all Nathanael needs and he proclaims Jesus as the Son of God.

God *saw* and *knew* Martin Luther King, Jr., when God came a calling him. Born January 15, 1929, MLK grew up a pastor’s son in Atlanta. Martin was a voice crying in the wilderness. We often think of King as a civil rights activist, yet he was first and foremost a Christian preacher and it was his religious faith that fueled his dream. Martin Luther King, Jr. gained national prominence as a result of his speaking skills and personal courage, which included leading Montgomery, Alabama through its bus boycott movement, his house being bombed, physical assaults, and staging and joining student sit-ins. In 1964, King was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. King remained committed to the use of non-violent techniques. And, we thank God for Martin of Atlanta.

We have another call story in our Hebrew scripture.

Eli, who is a high priest, explains to young Samuel that God is calling, and that should the Lord call again, to remain where he was, to not jump up and look for the answer outside of himself, but to sit still, and quietly, calmly respond to God by saying, “Yes, Lord, I know it is you who speaks to me. I am your servant. Speak, for I am listening to you.” So Samuel went and lay down in his usual place.

I bet he didn't go back to sleep--Can't you just seem him staring wide-eyed at the ceiling?!

Well, "You Know Who" comes again and the text says, "he stood there." I was curious about that, so I consulted several translations of the Bible. They all say, "the Lord came and stood there." I don't think it means that God came in some visible form, but there was no doubt there was a Presence standing before Samuel. Maybe you've had that experience. Now, standing right there next to him, so there'd be no doubt, God calls Samuel. Aware, eager, and devoted, Samuel says, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Here I am, Lord.

In honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. day tomorrow, I'd like to share some other *Here I am* stories:

A Ku Klux Klan member who burned a cross on a black couple's lawn and later became a Roman Catholic priest wrote his victims an apology a couple of years ago. He said that he was blinded by hate and ignorance when he targeted them in 1977 at their home in Maryland. He told them that he rejected those beliefs before entering the priesthood, but was too ashamed to face them at the time. He wrote, "I believe now that all people can live together in peace regardless of race." Here I am, Lord.

Jackie Robinson was an exceptionally talented baseball player. In 1957 he retired from the sport and took an active role fighting racial segregation and other injustices. He sent a powerful letter to President Eisenhower in 1958 in response to a speech which the president had called for patience from African Americans in their fight for civil rights. Robinson writes that they "have been the most patient of all people. 17 million Negroes cannot do as you suggest and wait for the hearts of men to change. We want to enjoy now the rights that we feel we are entitled to as Americans. We must pursue aggressively goals which all other Americans achieved over 150 years ago." Robinson told Eisenhower that the president was unwittingly crushing the spirit of freedom in Negroes by constantly urging them to stand down, and how that was giving hope to the leaders who would take from them even the freedoms they now enjoyed. Robinson asked for an unequivocal statement backed up by action that America is determined to provide - in the near future - for Negroes - the freedoms we are entitled to under the constitution. Respectfully yours, Jackie Robinson. Here I am, Lord.

I want to say a little something about spirituals, which are a here we are story, and we're going to sing one in a bit, "My Lord, What a Morning." In 1790 there were about 750,000 African-Americans. It so happens that the music expression of those enslaved in the south greatly influenced American religious and secular

musical forms. While some Christians attempted to use the Bible to justify slavery,

the majority of African-Americans embraced Christianity and it helped them create songs, particularly spirituals. Most slaves couldn't read, so the spirituals helped to teach them the bible. There were 3 primary musical forms produced during the 18th and 19th centuries: field hollers, work songs, and spirituals. Because slaves weren't allowed to talk to one another while working in the field, singing was permitted. Slaves established a communication network that was unintelligible to their white overseers. Spirituals were fashioned by combining verses from the bible and hymns with portions of sermons and prayers given during worship. "My Lord, What a Morning!" was essentially re-created from the hymn "Behold the Awful Trumpet Sounds," based on the Book of Revelation, with hope for a positive judgment day and afterlife. Life was going to get better...

Now I'd like to tell a different here we are story.

I know of a church whose attendance has been steadily dropping - as most are. When their Council met recently they said to one another, "with our \$350,000 endowment (down from \$600,000 15 years ago), we think we have about 10 years left unless we go for it and make some changes." It was frustrating for the pastor who had made these suggestions all along, but that's another story. This church had voted to become open and affirming - maybe 13 years ago. Open and Affirming is an official designation of congregations in the United Church of Christ affirming the full inclusion of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender persons in the church's life and ministry. Churches go through basically a year long, sometimes 2 year education and study process, which culminates in a vote. If the vote is successful, that church then has the official ONA designation. So, this church became ONA. But, as is often the way with these churches, after they did all of that good,

intentional opening minds work about what it truly means to be ONA, after the big vote day comes and goes, not much more is said about it. The church included the designation in their mission statement and just assumed that gay and gay welcoming people would just enter their doors. We're told to go tell it on the mountain, but we end up keeping a really good thing the best kept secret. So, now this church has decided they'll stop hiding their light in a bushel basket. But, to back up a second more, many years back they put a small rainbow flag decal on their church sign, the symbol of gay pride - it could barely be seen, but it so angered a prominent church member, one who had really supported the pastor, that he and his wife left the church. A decal! And, he had been there for the vote - just didn't want anyone in the town to know about it! Back to the present moment, at

this critical meeting the pastor said, what if we just go ahead and put it out there who we are to this town - Here we are, Lord - we are open and affirming - take it or leave it - love us or hate us, this is who we are - this is what we believe God wants our mission to be in the world. *All* of council agreed and said, let's do it. So, the pastor got a large-sized rainbow flag and he and the moderator hung it on the side of the church a couple of weeks ago. Well, a prominent Sunday School teacher, actually even chair of the CE committee - again - someone who had been there years ago with the vote - called the pastor in a rage. Yes, she knew the church was ONA but she didn't think the whole world had to know. Why can't we just quietly be open and affirming of people without everyone being able to see just who our church is inviting into it!! The pastor tried to tell the woman that without speaking up about it, without witnessing to a justice issue, without putting out some sign that says this is a safe space for those who have been excluded by churches, how is anyone going to know?

The pastor said, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day is coming up. What if he had remained quiet? The pastor wanted to say, but didn't, for you as a woman, where would you be right now without all of the efforts toward trying to get the Equal Rights Amendment passed? *Our denomination has been on the frontlines of battling racism, sexism, and homophobia.* We're not poised to be a quiet people! - as Christians, and as the United Church of Christ. You may know that the Congregational Church ordained the first woman, Antoinette Brown Blackwell in 1852. The good news is that it seems the member has come around.

I'd like for all of us here to be able to say, Here we are, Lord - use FCCB to help all people be free; to get the word out that **all** are created **equal**. We have to tell that on the mountain. People need to know, people need to hear that all are blessed, all are welcome in our church, that we're all equal. By the way, churches don't normally go through the ONA process during the interim time. Typically, if desired, it happens in year two or three of a new minister's pastorate.

Here we are, Martin - and, we're so grateful you were born.

What I know for sure is that each of us are called to shine in the ways God has uniquely given us to shine. May you be a star that falls into someone's morning. May you be a star that falls into someone's morning. Amen.

