

1 Samuel 3:10, (11-20)
Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 17, 2021, Southeastern Synod Staff Sermons
Pastor Karen Boda

Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I'm Pastor Karen Boda, Assistant to the Bishop for Congregational Life, and I bring you greetings from Bishop Kevin Strickland and all of the Synod Staff on this the Second Sunday after the Epiphany.

Twenty-one-year-old Chris Nikic set a world record in November. He is the first Ironman finisher with down syndrome. The Ironman is considered one of the most brutal athletic events on the planet. Chris swam 2.4 miles. Biked for 112 miles. And then ran 26.2 miles. Wow. Just wow.

In a video aptly named *Anything is Possible*, his dad told the story of Chris growing up; the constant illnesses and hospitalizations, the challenges in school, the rejection by so many. Chris struggled with sports too. He wasn't a natural athlete. When he began competing in the Special Olympic triathlons, he'd finish last in every single race. In 2019, he was 10th out of 10, lagging 20 minutes behind the ninth place finisher. It was tempting to give up since Chris had shown such little progress after so much effort. It was tempting to just quit, knowing that Chris had done what he could, but that he just couldn't do any more.

It wasn't obvious, but his dad said that underneath something was happening in Chris that was building and preparing him for something much bigger. Chris was being built from what he was... to what he will be.

It's our Old Testament lesson that I want to reflect on today. It's the story of the boy, Samuel, who lived when the word of God was rare and visions were not widespread. The people couldn't hear God. They couldn't see God. They couldn't feel God. God seemed absent.

Samuel lived with an elderly priest, Eli, whose eyesight had grown dim, whose leadership was waning, and whose sons were out of control. Samuel wasn't perfect, but he was perfectly human. He heard the cries in the night of "Samuel. Samuel." He thought it was Eli who was calling him, but instead it was God. God called on Samuel three times. It was only with Eli's help that Samuel knew who was calling. But Samuel didn't know what to do with the call from God. Samuel doubted, hesitated, wanted to hide what he'd heard from Eli.

Perhaps unknown at the time, God was preparing Samuel for something even bigger. As Samuel grew, God remained with him and continued to appear to him. Samuel trusted God's voice, and the people trusted the voice of the prophet Samuel. God turned Samuel from what was... to what will be.

Is God taking us, transforming us, from what was to what will be?
Preparing us for something much bigger?

During these past months, the number of huge, insurmountable problems we are facing as a nation has skyrocketed. I find myself frustrated, exhausted, angry, and scared. Haven't we been through enough?

The pandemic has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. Hospitals are overflowing onto the sidewalks. Those we know – those we love - have died. What's scary is that this isn't even the lead story on the news anymore!

Last week rioters stormed our nation's Capital to stop a constitutionally mandated process. I struggle to find the words to describe the horror of that day; the injustices which played out. People died. Nothing about that was right or justified. With an inauguration just days away, we continue to pray for a peaceful transition of power.

This is MLK weekend, for goodness sakes. A time to remember when Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream - a dream when we would see the color of a face, yes, but see beyond that color into the heart of one of God's children. Yet today, the racial divisions and injustices are more and more pronounced.

My daughter called this week in tears, as she grieved with the homeless in Atlanta whose tents under the bridges were being dragged away. U.S. employers shed 140,000 jobs last month.

The list goes on. My list goes on. Your list goes on.

Few will argue that these times are hard, hard, hard. But in these times, do we feel God, do we hear God, do we see God calling on us to speak out? To act? Calling us from what was... to what will be?

If God is calling me, I'll be honest, I feel like Chris – an ocean of waves in front of me to swim through. There are bad things in those waves and I'm scared. There are miles and miles and miles of hard unrelenting pavement in front of me that I must somehow get over. It's more than I can do alone. More than I can take.

But yet I wonder. God *asks* us to wonder. God *requires* us to wonder. Are we being called from what was...to what will be? Is our *country* being called from what was...to what will be? Is this the pivot point? Like Samuel, is then when I get out of the bed and do what God is calling me – us - to do? Like Chris, is this my – our - starting line?

As we stand at this starting line, it's not hard to see that we are fully human. Oh my goodness, we are so human. We are so very flawed. As I watched the video of Chris during the triathlon, his humanity was so very clear. He got blisters on his feet. He was bitten by ants. He fell off his bike. And he cried. He didn't want to go on. He was scared. Samuel didn't know who was

calling him. Then once he knew, and once he knew what God wanted him to do, he doubted. He was deep down terrified.

We are human too. We are scared to have real dialogue, not with the radicals on either end, but with our family, our friends and neighbors, the person who pre pandemic sat next to us in the pew. We find it hard to love our neighbor, especially when we don't like the candidate they support or what they write on social media, the color of their skin or whether they wear a mask. We doubt that God will give us the words, guide our actions, and strengthen us. We are scared to stand up for justice and truth. We are scared to cross the starting line.

We are scared, and we also need help. We can't do any of this on our own. Due to balance issues, Chris has to be helped when he starts or stops his bike, or he falls to the ground. And he stopped continually. Sure, he stopped because he was exhausted, but he mostly stopped for the hugs. He needed hugs to keep going. Samuel needed the guidance and wisdom of Eli, telling him to listen again, and again, that it might, just might, be God who was calling him. Samuel didn't hear God on his own. He couldn't.

It is our relationships and our community which provides **hope** and a gives us the strength and the courage to do what God calls us to do. We need to intentionally surround ourselves with those who will help us hear God and make sure that it is indeed God we hear and not our own egos or desires. We need to surround ourselves with those who will hug the strength back into us so we can do God's work.

This is all so hard – knowing what we are called to do and then doing it. It's easy for us to lose hope – especially in times like these. It's easy to feel like the problems are too big, too mighty; that we are too small. That we are alone.

But remember. God didn't abandon Samuel. As Samuel grew up, God gave him the words and the strength. God was with him. Always. And remember, God gave us his only son. The ultimate incarnation of God's love for us. And the Holy Spirit, to be with us and among us. To never ever leave us alone.

Today, when we are scared, overwhelmed, angry, unsure of what to do, we can reflect back on Martin Luther King Jr's words from January 1956, when he too was frustrated, exhausted, angry, and scared.

He wrote:

I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.

He prayed:

I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage,

they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.

At that moment, King experienced the presence of the Divine as he had never experienced God before. He said it seemed as though he could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: “Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.”

Kind said that almost at once his fears began to go. His uncertainty disappeared. He was ready to face anything.¹

Amen.

¹ Martin Luther King Jr, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, 1st edition (Harper & Brothers, 1958), 124–125.