

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, January 14, 2018)

*Please note: This Sunday our United Voices choir sang the Psalm in a musical setting by Allen Pote.
The text below is drawn from the Revised Standard Version of the scriptures.*

Text: **Psalm 139:1-12**

O 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.

Text: **Samuel 3:1-20**

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; 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. Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" 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. 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." Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. 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. 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. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

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. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. 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. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever." 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. But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." 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." 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."

As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

Pastor Donald's Reflections: "To Be Known"

There are moments from my childhood and whole big pieces of my adolescence and young adult-hood that are nearly blank for me in terms of memories and some of the people I was interacting with then.

Growing up in a conservative Mennonite atmosphere, taught by conscientious and faith-filled people, I got the idea pretty quickly that what I was feeling for other boys and the natural inclinations of my heart and other vital organs towards members of my own gender were not what I was "supposed" to feel and that, perhaps, these natural feelings and inclinations were of the devil and not of the God I knew and loved and whose Word I was steeped in from the moment I was born.

Rather than trust that still small voice that always told me I was loved and okay and created in the image of my Maker, I tried to do what I thought everyone else wanted me to do and believe what I thought everyone else was believing and training me to accept.

Rather than feel truly known by God or anyone else in my life, I felt as though the only way to survive and be the person God had created was to deny the natural feelings and inclinations I had and to work as hard as I could to be another version of myself – the one I thought everyone wanted me to be.

But rather than leading me to a place of understanding and being well and truly known by those around me, this kind of disassociation and re-creation led instead to feeling like I had no real idea of who I was or what my true opinions, thoughts and feelings were about hardly anything. I couldn't really trust anybody's love or

understanding because I knew in my heart that I was not well and truly known by anyone except by my God who must be so ashamed of how I had been created, even though that never really made much sense to me.

Those moments and months are lost to me because I was working so hard to be somebody other than myself that I wasn't creating real and authentic memories that could be perceived by the real and authentic person I was to become when I accepted myself as the person God created me to be and finally felt absolutely known. Known in such a way that others were finally able to know me and understand me and show their love for me in a way I never thought possible.

"Oh, God, you have searched me and KNOWN me," the Psalmist sings in today's psalm. Even when we have no idea who we are, God knows us. God has always known us and will always know us. God reaches out and calls to us to be known to ourselves as we are to God. To be loved for everything we are and everything we are called to be and to know that, as we heard the voice from heaven cry out last week at Jesus's baptism, "this is my beloved child in whom I am well pleased." Remember how Rev. Lorraine had us repeat that and say it to one another? It is something we need to wake up saying, and then sing it to ourselves throughout the day and whisper it in prayer at night. Knowing that we are well and truly known and loved allows us to well and truly know and love others is the way that God loves us.

The story we heard today from the Hebrew scriptures, one I and perhaps some of you have heard over and over and over again during our lifetimes, was always one of my absolute favorite stories to be told as a child since it's HAS a child, little Samuel, at the heart of the story. But even more than that, I loved it because it had Samuel listening to and being taught to respond to God with a confident, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." As a child, even more than as I grew into adulthood, I knew that I could trust God to speak and that I could rely on what I heard.

It saddens me to know how I strayed from that, even as I'm heartened by the fact that God's still small voice never stopped calling out to me, encouraging me to be the person God always knew me to be and holding my hand in love through some of the darkest nights of my soul.

"You know when I sit down and when I rise up;" the Psalmist continues to sing...
"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 God, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me."

Surely this is a God who is always present to us, and who knows us in ways we can sometimes only hope to know ourselves. How often have I realized my own stubbornness and ignorance was keeping me from hearing what God was truly saying

to me? How often have I realized that it has been my own unwillingness to see the ways in which God was directing me along the path that has kept me from the true and glorious fulfillment of what God wants for me?

I truly believe it is only by being in step with God, in communication with Christ, and in communion with the Holy Spirit that we find the answers for our lives and can proclaim in praise that we are truly “fearfully and wonderfully made.”

Did you notice in the Hebrew story how Samuel first responds to God’s voice as if it were Eli’s? Again and again he rises, thinking that the voice he hears calling, “Samuel, Samuel” must be the voice of his mentor, the one who until this point in time was, he thought, the only one calling for him and giving him direction. But in this moment and in this place and time, the Elder finally wakes up and leads the boy into his own calling, encouraging him to receive the voice of the Lord and proclaim to God rather than man, “Here I am!” and “Speak for your servant is listening.”

“God is constantly speaking in our lives through insights, encounters, hunches, dreams, bursts of energy, and inspirational thoughts,” Dr. Bruce Epperly writes. “Our calling is to listen and then follow, shaping our encounters with God in our own unique ways... Samuel’s response serves as a model for our own spiritual formation. Our daily prayers should include a plea that we listen to God’s whisperings in our lives. This prayer is completed by our willingness to pause and be still to heighten our awareness of divine wisdom... Nothing is too small or large for divine awareness and activity.”

We can see ourselves in both roles of this story of Samuel. For each of us has a role to play in the kin-dom of God. Perhaps you are someone with the gift to see the presence of God in another and to help him or her step into his or her own calling. Or maybe you’re the bright, fresh even naïve presence, ready to listen and ready to receive, but needing the encouragement that what you’re hearing is right and what you perceive is of God. All roles are needed in carrying out this great God play we find ourselves in.

As Samuel, we need to present ourselves fully to God with the readiness and willingness to be transformed by whatever we hear God speaking. We need to find a way to trust that the inner voice we’re hearing is truly the voice of God and not become so bogged down with all the chatter of the world and the well intentioned (or not) judgments of those around us that we stop listening to the still small voice within.

“I do not want my too many words to separate you from astonishment or to provide you with a substitute for your own inner experience,” Father Richard Rohr writes in his essay, “Knowing and Not Knowing.” “We all need, forever, what Jesus described as “the beginner's mind” of a curious child. A beginner's mind or what some call “constantly renewed immediacy” is the best path for spiritual wisdom. Tobin Hart writes: “Instead of grasping for certainty, wisdom rides the question, lives the question.... When the quest for certainty and control is pushed to the background, the possibility of wonder returns. Wonder provides a gateway to wise insight.”

And what wonder awaited Samuel as he responded at last to God's call and listened to what God had to tell him. As his ears were opened and he heard the word of the Lord it wasn't a happy word by any means, but a word of fulfillment and truth that apparently needed to be heard by Eli since he accepted it so readily and without question.

Sometimes in our Calling we must be prepared to deliver and accept truth that doesn't feel so good or that we would prefer not be true if possible. But God tells us again and again that the truth shall set us free. Accepting that which comes from God and not being afraid to step out in that truth can mean great risk. And yet we can surely know that God goes with us in the truth telling, assuring us that whatever happens as a result is of God and through God whether we can experience the result or not.

As we gather here on this Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. weekend, how can we but help to remember a man who truly strode into his calling, speaking the truth given to him, aware of the consequences, but listening deeply and acting profoundly on what he heard.

In his essay, "Maybe God is Trying to Tell You Something," H. Beeker Hicks, Jr. finds this correlation between the 12-year-old Samuel and the 30-something Dr. King. "...to read the story of Samuel," he writes, "whose life serves as background to the place of Dr. King, is to understand that in order for spiritual or social change to be accomplished, one must first be awakened to the world around you...Dr. Allan Boesak, has suggested that 'God must raise up faithful men and women who have heard God's voice in the cries of the oppressed, who take refuge in the love of God and from within that place of refuge (find) courage and step into the world to challenge the powers of evil.'"

Wake up, Samuel. Wake up, people of God. Wake, awake, O my Soul and follow the leading of Christ for the empowerment of not just one's self, but for all of God's people.

Just as the world keeps on turning, so must we continue to renew our call, seek new visions and keep abreast of what is happening around us in our own families and communities. Be involved, God tells us. Keep your head in the game. Be my ears and eyes as co-creators with me. Even when our own frail human senses seem dimmed God is still speaking and leading us to the truth if we are open to it.

"Here I AM," Samuel replies repeatedly to the call he hears. Can we, as we go forward in our lives as this New Year begins to unfold respond so faithfully to the Call WE receive? Can we step out of our comfort zones and seek new ways to understand and to be in this world? Can we reach out to those who are in need of the prophetic word God has given specifically to us? Can we be a witness to the wonderful ways God works through us, no matter what our age when we have the courage to say, "I know it is God calling and God is calling me?"

“A sense of calling represents a step toward greater self-awareness,” Paul Keim writes in his article, “Call Me” for the Christian Century. “To become aware of a call is to be aware of oneself in a new way, as the psalmist was aware: You know me, O Lord. You’ve done the research. You’ve read my file. Through the call I know myself as someone known; my life as something comprehended from beginning to end; my days as already written in that book “when none of them as yet existed.” This is no recipe for fatalistic determinism, but rather a profound metaphor providing a way out of the modern dilemma. In the place of an alienated self at the center of an arbitrary, amoral universe, or a postmodern ghost trying to conjure up its name through myriad manipulations, we choose to live as those known and called by name.”

Amen? Amen!