

Rev. Karen Graham –Church of the Redeemer
January 18, 2009
1 Samuel 3: 1-10

With so much going on in today's service, I know I really don't need to say much more. So I won't – say much, I mean.

What I will say is that I want each of us today to think not just generally about the story of Samuel being called by God in the middle of the night, or the remembrances of Martin Luther King, Jr., but to think particularly about them. Which means to think about them in terms of ourselves, and our own experiences and our own lives.

So to get some of that thinking on its way, I will share with you this blog written a year ago on January 20, 2008, by a United Methodist pastor in North Carolina. The blog is titled, "Martin Luther King, Jr. and me" -- and it goes like this:

"Martin Luther King was 39 years old when he was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. This January I am turning 39 years old. What have I done with my life, compared with what Martin Luther King did with his? Well, not much. But that's OK. Rowan Williams once said that when he get to heaven, God will not ask him why he was not Martin Luther King; God will ask him why he was not Rowan Williams. I figure when I show up at the pearly gates, there's a good chance that God will ask me, "Why weren't you Jonathan Marlowe?" God will ask: "Why didn't you do the things I called you to do? Why didn't you do the things that I uniquely equipped you to do?" I may not lead a civil rights movement, but I can help one person find a job. I may not win a Nobel Peace Prize, but I can live peacefully with my neighbor. I won't give a speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, but I can do my best with next week's lectionary. We sometimes focus on the great movers and shakers of history and forget that God usually works through ordinary people like you and me. I know that faith isn't private -- God works through communities and churches and even nations. But Martin Luther King Jr. did not set out to be a great American hero. He set out to be faithful to God one day at a time, and found himself the leader of a nation-wide movement for freedom and equality. We too should begin with the little things -- being faithful to our spouses, patient with a friend, gracious with an enemy, merciful with those who need our help, and generous in giving. I doubt I'll ever spend the night in a Birmingham jail, but I can visit someone in a Salisbury jail. I will never organize a bus boycott, but I can make a friend of one of the school bus drivers here in Rowan County. I won't integrate a school system, but I can be a big brother to a child who needs a kind person to eat lunch with at the school. I need the church to help me be faithful in these ways, so that God won't have to ask me, "Why weren't you Jonathan Marlowe?" (by Jonathan Marlowe, www.theolog.or/blog/2008.)

What stands out in the story from 1 Samuel we heard a bit ago? For me it's that the Lord called out Samuel's name -- each time he called, he called Samuel by name. "Samuel, Samuel!" And again, "Samuel, Samuel!" And again, "Samuel, Samuel!"

The Lord didn't waken Samuel with generic language -- God didn't say, "Hey you, that young boy lying in the temple," or, "Wake up, servant of Eli," or, "Listen, I need whoever happens to be in the temple tonight to wake up and listen to me." No, God called Samuel by name. God didn't want just any one to listen; God wanted Samuel to listen.

I'm glad we have our children's choir going again. But I'm even more glad that Brenda and Mauri and Thea are leading that choir. I'm glad our church lay leader makes hospital visits, and teaches Sunday School, and serves on committees. But I'm even more glad David Miller is our lay leader. Today we are installing those of you who are serving in church leadership. You have accepted a certain position. And that's good -- but it's what you do with that position that will make a difference. When I look over our church leadership roster for 2009, I see your names -- and when I see your names, I think of who you are, and I think of how you will do what you have been asked to do. Brenda Grover and Denise Jackson will bring a certain level of experience and creativity to their work in our Education program that are unique to Brenda and Denise. Patrick Mullen leads our Staff Parish Relations Committee in ways that use Patrick's abilities. Phil Holland will bring his years of leadership here in our church and in the district and conference to the new position of Nurture Coordinator. That's the way it is with all of you who are serving in various leadership capacities. You aren't being asked to be just like the person who preceded you. You aren't being asked to be just like everyone else on the committee with you. You are asked to be you. You are asked to bring your own abilities and opinions and experiences and ideas and to do the best you are able to do. It's not the title of the position that matters -- it's the name of the person who fills that position.

So what if your name isn't on this list? What does that mean? Does that mean you're somehow exempt from all that I've been talking about? Of course not. Because God calls all of us to live out our faith -- and one of the ways we answer that call is through our participation in the church, and participation is for every one. Not just for those whose names are on a leadership roster. Every one here today can add to the life of this church. For example: Clara Williams comes every week and straightens up the sanctuary and refills all the pew holders with envelopes and pencils. Harold Jackson is learning from Eric Skinner how to maintain our boilers and water heaters. Carol Womack is offering her driving services to people who need to get to the airport or to doctor's appointments and any money donated for gas will be given back to the church. David Dusek helps take care of our flower beds and landscaping. Joyce Roper plays her cello; Kenny Bowman plays his flute and saxophone; Cynthia Larsen plays her mandolin; Heather Mullen plays her guitar and the piano; Bridgett Emerson plays her flute -- and whenever they share their music with us, we are all blessed. David Rodney built a tree house for Vacation Bible School. And so on. Your name doesn't have to be on the list for you to share your gifts or for you to make a difference.

None of us has exactly the same gifts or abilities or interests as everyone else. Samuel wasn't Eli. And Samuel wasn't King David, either. Samuel was Samuel -- and as he responded to God's call, Samuel lived out his faith, and Samuel was who God needed Samuel to be. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the Martin God needed him to be. He wasn't

Malcolm, he wasn't Jesse, he wasn't Otis. He was Martin. And that's how it is for us too. We are who we are. And God expects us to do what we know how to do, and to get involved in the places we can be involved in, and to speak the words we can speak, and to share the gifts we have to share, and to do his will in our lives. Not to imitate or re-live someone else's life –but to live our own life as the people we are – as – [say your own name out loud].

As our work together unfolds this year, as opportunities to serve arise, as ways to get involved in the church and in the community are made known, as issues of justice are faced, as learning avenues are opened up, I invite you to be who you are -- and to be the best you can be. To do those things that come from your heart. To speak up for others with your own voice. To reach out with the skills and the resources and the compassion that are yours to share God's love, to proclaim good news, to be agents of change and hope in our world. God doesn't need us to be like somebody else. God needs us to be ourselves. God knows and calls us by name. May all of us listen and respond.