

“A Single Garment of Destiny”

I Samuel 3:1-20, I Corinthians 6:12-20, John 1:43-51

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 17, 2021, dedicated to Julian and Adriana Voss-Andreae who created the sculpture for the Social Justice Park, “Our Single Garment of Destiny,” to LoAnne Crane, Sally Crane Cox and the entire Crane Family whose generous gift made this new sculpture possible, to Tom Worley and the Washington Gladden Social Justice Park Trustees and Board of Directors, to all who are making the dedication ceremony a beautiful celebration and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Our passage begins today in I Samuel 3 with Samuel hearing a voice in the night. Although he doesn’t recognize the voice at first, it is God calling the boy, Samuel, to serve as the first judge of Israel. This was in the days when judges were warrior leaders,

consecrated by God to be the human head of Israel. This is a big deal.

“Samuel” “Here I am!”

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Samuel continued to answer through the night to this voice calling in the dark. It is not until the fourth exchange that it becomes clear that it is God who is issuing the call! But things have gotten so bad in Israel, that the voice of God is no longer known. No one can distinguish that voice.

When God finally gets Samuel’s attention, God delivers some terrible news to Samuel (in verses 11-20). God tells the boy judge that the house of Eli is so corrupt; it is lost beyond any ritual rescue. God will replace Eli and chase his whole dishonest family out of the temple. The leader of the cult of priests is done.

Early the next morning, under extreme pressure from Eli, Samuel tells the old priest to his face that his order of priests and his house are to be terminated and Eli is to be expelled from the priesthood. Rather than shouting “Fake News” or “Cancel Culture,” Eli responds quietly, submissively, without question and with total acceptance says this, *“Yahweh has spoken.”* The Almighty’s vote has been counted. The verdict from the Judge of heaven and earth is final. God has spoken. “You are out.” Eli packs up his bags and leaves without incident.

Lost in the drama about Eli’s failures and the corruption of his family is the simple truth that Samuel’s purity of heart and his election by God to lead the nation as Israel’s first judge is a huge

moment. The joyful news of God choosing the next leader is buried in God's expulsion of Eli and his family from the temple.

Some things never change - Good News seems to always get buried by bad news.

Before the call of Samuel and the expulsion of Eli, our author tells us, "*The word of God was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.*" (I Samuel 3:1). Religion in Samuel's time had reached such a low point that even its priestly leader, Eli, could not recognize God when God spoke. Eli's eyes were dimming and his spirit was tired and troubled, and when God came to the temple, speaking to one in his care, Eli did not know who it was.

This has me thinking... has our religion reached the same low point? Have we become like Eli – our eyesight so weak and our spirit so troubled and tired that we can't recognize God's voice speaking?

Some would tell you, "No." They would say things have never been better for Christianity! They would tell you that Christianity is growing in Asia and Africa, it is spreading in the suburbs, and the word of God is alive and well across America with more and more people joining megachurches, more and more networks reaching people through TV ministries, and all of the "purpose driven churches" entering the marketplace of values. They would say the church has never been better. They would say, "God is speaking directly to us."

I'm not so sure about that. Call me a cynic or maybe this call awakens something within me. But I think that if God were speaking and calling a prophet in this generation, most of the

Church would miss the whispering voice of God speaking to the prophet in the night. With no camera lights and no one to turn it into a best-selling book, God's voice whispering, "my Daughter, this is God Almighty!" or "my Son, I'm speaking to you now!" would go unheeded.

I'm afraid to say it but I believe we have become more like Eli than we care to admit. The church in too many places and with too many pastors has become captive to itself. The church in too many places and with too many pastors can't hear God's still speaking voice. In too many places with too many pastors, we have become captive to profit-driven culture wars rather than the prophet-driven Word of God. In the church, Profit has trumped Prophet too many times.

We need to hear the voice of God. We need to see the prophets when they come. On January 15, 1929 God birthed a prophet into our nation. God sent us a prophet whose voice would become clear and strong. He wasn't perfect – but neither are you, and neither am I. However, he was undeniably a prophet of our Still Speaking God.

58 years ago, in April 1963, from a jail cell in the Birmingham, Alabama City Jail, America's prophet wrote a letter on the edges of a newspaper, on scraps of paper that men would pass down through the jail cells to his solitary confinement cell till finally he was granted legal paper, a legal pad to write the letter. He delivered that letter to seven white clergymen and one rabbi who were all telling him that he was an "outside agitator," he needed to slow down and he needed to get out of town. They said his presence was "unwise and untimely." That deserved a response.

In his brilliant little book, *Why We Can't Wait*, which contains King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and chronicles the years 1962-1963, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. answers the criticism of seven white bishops and pastors and one rabbi with clarity and purpose. But he first speaks clearly to Black pastors.

When Dr. King first arrived in Birmingham, he writes of his early meetings with African-American pastors:

*"To the ministers I stressed the need for a **social gospel** to supplement the gospel of individual salvation. I suggested that only a "dry as dust" religion prompts a minister to extol the glories of Heaven while ignoring the social conditions that cause men an earthly hell . . . I asked how (Blacks) would ever gain their freedom without the guidance, support, and inspiration of their spiritual leaders"* (ML King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*, Signet Books, NY, NY, 1963, p. 67).

Like Samuel, Dr. King was witnessing a religion in America in 1963 that was so heavenly bound that it was no earthly good. In fact, this became one of his two most heartfelt cries to the American religious community when he wrote his "Letter from Birmingham Jail." He cited two observations of the Christians who were critics of the movement.

First, he wrote, the Christian community has committed itself to a gospel that has no concern for the social issues of the day. He saw the Christian Church as wrapped up – body and soul – in things that completely distanced themselves from the suffering of people and the witness of Jesus Christ for changing that which was wrong in society.

Speaking as a man who fully loved the church, he wrote:

“There was a time when the church was very powerful – in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and the principles of popular opinion, it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being “disturbers of the peace” and “outside agitators.” But the Christians pressed on in the conviction that they were a “colony of heaven” called to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but they were big in commitment.”

He continued:

“Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is the arch-defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church’s silent – and often even vocal sanctions – of things that are. But, the judgement of God will be upon the church if this does not change” (Ibid, p. 91).

That’s what a prophet says and does.

Beyond the status-quo-compliant body of prejudicial enablers, Dr. King was disturbed by a second element he saw in his times. An even greater problem he saw in the religious communities (church and synagogue), those problems came not from the KKK, not from white nationalists, not from separationists, but from moderate whites – Christians and Jews – who were more committed to “order” than to “justice,” who preferred a “negative peace” or the absence of tension over and against a “positive peace” or the presence of justice (Ibid, p. 84).

In King's words, such people are always waiting for a better time to do something. "*Shallow understanding from people of good will,*" Dr. King wrote, "*is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will*" (Ibid, p. 85).

People of goodwill will say: we will join the next march. They will question the mayor after the next election. They will preach something next weekend - and on and on and on.

Dr. King saw a church with no social gospel, with moderates standing on the sidelines taking shots at visionary leaders seeking freedom, justice, and faith for all. That's what he saw. He saw cowering not courageous people. He saw faithless not faithful people. He saw those who were critical of others who are trying to set the world on a just trajectory, the moral arch. From his solitary confinement in the darkened cell of a Birmingham city jail, Dr. King cried out to America, just as God had cried out to Samuel in the night, "***America.***" "***America.***" "***America.***"

58 years have passed from the time when the Black pastor and prophet of Atlanta, Georgia cried out to us on scrapes of paper, on used newspaper, and then on a legal pad from his solitary confinement in Birmingham, Alabama.

I would love to tell you that a church with no social gospel at the heart of its actions and moderate Christians who criticize visionary pastoral leadership seeking justice in this city and this nation is a thing of the past. But I cannot tell you that. That would be a lie!

I would like to tell you that the church hears and responds to God's cry on behalf of the poor all the time. But I can't tell you that is always happening. It's just not true.

And I would love to tell you that the garbage workers of Memphis and the working poor of this nation for whom Dr. King was gunned down, trying to organize them for a better way of life are all fine today. But I cannot tell you that, it wouldn't be the truth!

We don't have to be that way. This church always has had a word in the silent movements and the inaction of others people and places. You and I have no excuse for speaking up and taking part in what changes around us. As a congregation whose origins come from the abolition of slavery and moving slaves on the Underground Railroad from slavery to freedom, our heart and soul is connected to the Social Gospel.

I have a message for you today. With the whispering cry of God to each of us this morning, "*America, America, America*" – we each need to figure out what our response will be.

In responding, I point you to the fourth paragraph in the letter from a Birmingham jail. He writes about those who are telling him to leave town. He says these words:

"(Moreover), I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds" (Ibid, p. 77).

DO you see what he is doing here?

He is tying us together in a time when we feel like we are torn apart. He's bringing us together. We have been told this weekend to not come downtown. We've been advised to go on Zoom, or maybe climb under a table. We've been told to be afraid, we've been told to be quiet. But how can we be afraid and how can we be quiet when we know that it is fear that destroys faith, and quiet is wonderful on a monastic retreat but it's not the place for the musicians, and the preachers and the people of First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ in downtown Columbus.

We will not be afraid, and we will not be quiet. We will be courageous, and we will stay connected, and we will be woven together with those who seek to silence and kill. We will stand and we will march. We will confront evil and we will persevere because we believe that injustice anywhere is real and is a present danger and threat to justice everywhere.

There it is: *"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."*

We live our lives as those who are tied together "in an inescapable network of mutuality." We live our lives believing that we are "tied in a single garment of destiny." We live our lives believing "Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly." We believe the words of the prophet Martin. That's how we live our lives here.

These are difficult days. And we know there will be difficult days ahead.

With Columbus and other state capital's on lockdown and under assault, and with our nation's capital looking like Bagdad's Green

Zone during the Iraq war, we no longer look like the home of the free and the brave. We look like we're hiding and we have to come out and start talking because we're all together in one garment of destiny,

But God created us for difficult days. God created us to face whatever comes. We are strong in our faith. We are courageous people. We are determined people. And we are led by the power of God's spirit and by the light and love of God to overcome darkness and despair.

100 yards from where I am preaching this morning is a new sculpture – the most beautiful sculpture I have seen in this city ever. And there it is on the corner of Cleveland and Broad St. It has a name – “The Single Garment of Destiny.” Tomorrow morning, on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s holiday, we will dedicate that sculpture. It is AMAZING!

As you move around it, the beautiful image of the family of humanity that is cast in steel becomes invisible. 3-tons of steel disappear before your eyes. That doesn't seem possible but you have to come and see it after the unveiling. Seeing is believing. May we be changed by this sculpture so we see all of our sisters and brothers who have become invisible to us and in this last year there are more and more people that we're not seeing anymore. We have to come together in the fabric of this family we have.

I know we have a long way to go to rebuild relationships and regain trust in our nation and in our world in order to become truly the single garment of destiny rather than a tattered pile of strung-out threads of despair. And although it feels like midnight, let us always remember – it is darkest before the dawn. **And the dawn of a new day is coming.**

As Dr. King said in the closing words of his 1955 sermon, “A Knock at Midnight”:

*“Disappointment, sorrow, and despair are born at midnight, but morning follows. As the Psalmist says, **“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”** This faith – our faith adjourns the assemblies of hopelessness and brings new light into the dark chambers of pessimism.”*

We are and we always will be bound together in a single garment of destiny. So, let’s be the most beautiful garment ever created in the history of the world.

Amen.