

“What Makes Your Ears Tingle?”

January 15, 2012

Scripture: I Samuel 3:1-20; John 1:43-51

Do you remember the story of Samuel’s call from your childhood? I do. I can remember hearing this story and imagining what it must have been like to be young Samuel lying in the dark, hearing a voice. I’ve always loved the exchange between Samuel and Eli in this story. You can almost hear Samuel pattering across the floor of the temple at Shiloh, waking Eli. He may have been going blind, but his hearing was pretty good apparently. “Quit waking me up! I didn’t call you! Go back to sleep!” I’ve said that a few times in the middle of the night.

But after three times we can almost hear the light snap on in Eli’s mind. You know, Eli was not a great father to his sons. He sort of let them run wild. And he paid a price for that. God withdrew from Eli, became hidden; so much so that God’s word became rare; Eli’s vision was dim. He knew that, but he also knew the way God worked, so he told Samuel what to do. There was no malice in him. He was ready to hand the torch to Samuel.

So how many of you remember from your childhoods the message Samuel was given? I don’t know how enthralled I would have been by this story if I had ever really heard this part of it. God is about to do something that will make ears tingle when people about it. And for Samuel life gets very serious very quickly. This is a young boy. Can you imagine having to carry a message as heavy as that at that age? He was afraid to tell Eli; afraid to tell him what God would do.

No one likes to be the bearer of bad news, I suppose. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that Samuel’s news would make people’s ears “tingle with dismay.” That’s true for Eli, I suspect, probably for Samuel too. But I don’t know if it goes for everyone. Because embedded in this bad news is some marvelous good news. God was back. God was speaking again. God was about to do something new.

And isn’t that really what makes our ears tingle? When we live in a place cut off from God, when we’re paralyzed by fear or covered in despair, when our hope is gone because of losses or disappointments, to learn that God is about to do something new can electrify us. It can shock us out of our depression and lift us from the pit.

Maybe that’s how Phillip felt when he met Jesus. He couldn’t contain himself. He had to run and find his friend Nathanael. “We have found him!” We can feel his excitement as he shouts this good news to his friend. Now, John tells us this happened in Galilee which was Jesus’ home territory. Just before that Jesus had been in Bethany, about 80 miles to the south, where he attracted Simon Peter and Andrew. They were all from the same area, it seems, so they all shared similar circumstances. Galilee was a poor province, pretty far removed from the heart of things in Judea. So there probably wasn’t much work for young men who had no connections to the Romans. Maybe that’s why Nathanael was lying around under a tree in the middle of the day. What else did he have to do?

And how else should he have reacted to Phillip’s news? “Nazareth, huh?” Great. Someone just like them. That’s all he needed. But when there’s nothing to do all day, anything is worth looking at, so he goes with him. And before he says a thing to Jesus, Jesus sets

Nathanael's ears tingling. Jesus knows Nathanael is a mensch, someone he can rely on; Jesus knows Nathanael is hungry for something new.

What makes your ears tingle? What do you need to hear to lift you out of fear and despair? It was nearly 50 years ago, in 1963, that a huge crowd of people in Washington, D.C., heard some words that can still make my ears tingle. In April of that year Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was in the Birmingham City jail, serving time for participating in civil rights demonstrations there. It must have been a low point for the movement because several white clergymen, who were sympathetic to the movement, had published an open letter calling on King to stop nonviolent resistance efforts. King wrote his famous Letter from Birmingham City Jail on April 16th in which he said, "Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy, and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity."ⁱ A few months later, in August, King joined a rally in D.C. the likes of which that city had never seen.

On the National Mall, at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, King delivered a speech that would make ears tingle across the country, many with dismay but most with hope: "So I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. . . . I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, that one day, right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today! I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."ⁱⁱ

What makes your ears tingle? Is it words of hope spoken in times of despair; words of comfort when you grieve; words of reconciliation in the midst of conflict? What tells you that God is near and is doing something new? Because no matter what our circumstances, God has not abandoned us. No matter how rare God's word might seem, we are not forgotten. Eli learned that to his dismay, but to the hope of all Israel. Nathanael discovered it, in spite of his certainty nothing good could come from Nazareth. Dr. King held on to it in the face of brutality and disappointment. And it falls to us – when the future is uncertain, when obstacles seem insurmountable – it falls to us to listen for God's voice, to seek the mind of Christ, to have our ears tingle with excitement as God unveils something new among us.

That's the lesson we learn from the boy Samuel as we see him listening to God calling him. His willingness to be God's servant can be our response. It's the lesson we learn from Nathanael . . . and Phillip and Andrew and all the others as they fall in line behind Jesus to follow wherever he leads. Their faithfulness no matter what the cost can be our response. And when we do, God will use us to do something new in the world. And the ears of any who hear of it will tingle from the joy of knowing God is near.

Amen

ⁱ A Testament of Hope, James M. Washington, ed., p. 296.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 219.