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A Sermon for the Second Sunday After Epiphany 2009  
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Christ Church + Washington Parish  
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At my Tuesday morning clergy sermon-study group, we all agreed that it would be senseless, even irresponsible, to preach this Sunday without acknowledging both the Martin Luther King Jr. celebration tomorrow and the Inauguration on Tuesday. But what a difficult position that puts a preacher in! I'm sure you've noticed that the air has been ringing this week with echoes of some of the greatest orators in American history as we ready for what is, whatever you think of it personally, an historic occasion.

*Those of us who have said "Here I am" to God have places in our lives where God is reliably found – where the signs of the reign of God can be readily seen.*

Great words, great ideas, the memory of great deeds are rightly brought to mind: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in..."<sup>1</sup> "Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country."<sup>2</sup> "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."<sup>3</sup>

How can you hope to compete with words like these?

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."<sup>4</sup> "The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time; the hand of force may destroy, but cannot disjoin them."<sup>5</sup>

Words like these have power – real power, not just to move our hearts and to stir us to action, but to change and to create. The freedoms, the movements, the nation that these words invoke began to exist when these words were first spoken, and these words, and many like them, continue to strengthen, shape, and discipline us whenever they are recalled.

<sup>1</sup> Abraham Lincoln, second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865

<sup>2</sup> John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1969

<sup>3</sup> The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "I Have a Dream" speech, August 28, 1963

<sup>4</sup> The U.S. Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Jefferson: Rights of British America, 1774

It is easy to understand that God created the universe with a Word, calling it, and everything in it into being by speaking our names, when you see the creative power that words hold even for us mere mortals.

And our gospel and Hebrew scripture readings today are also about words of power: words that shape and change lives, words that create new life.

The story of the calling of Samuel is a familiar one, not only in its context, but also in our own experience. Young Samuel hears the call of God but doesn't understand it for what it is. He thinks that Eli is calling him, and keeps going to Eli when he hears the call. For us, it could be almost anything that we fix on when we begin to hear the promptings of God to move, to act, to change, to serve. We may try any number of pursuits or evasions before we finally stop and face God, and say, with Samuel, "Here I am." Those three words are the essential event of any faith journey. To stop running, or hiding, or plugging your ears, or seeking alternative voices and just say "Here I am" "I'm listening" "what would you have me do" to God is the essence of conversion, the beginning of faith.

These are words of power, words that create, that transform, that realign, that define and refine. Samuel's story calls us to stop shutting out those twinges of conscience, those fleeting pangs of guilt, those enticing hints of transformation, both glorious and terrifying, that are one of God's most potent ways of talking to us, and to listen to God, and to be changed.

And if those three words, "Here I am," in the Hebrew Bible lesson contain the essence of the conversion experience, there are three words in today's gospel lesson that sum up evangelism, the universal call of Christians to share the good news that is the source of our hope. For when Philip comes to a skeptical Nathaniel under the fig tree, he doesn't ply him with arguments or explanations – he doesn't use persuasion or intimidation or the threat of damnation or the promise of paradise. He merely says to Nathaniel, "Come and see." Those three words, I think, are the essence of evangelism.

Those of us who have said "Here I am" to God have places in our lives where God is reliably found – where the signs of the reign of God can be readily seen. In our families, friendships, communities, maybe even churches, the presence of God can be felt, the sick are healed, the needy are cared for, strangers are welcomed, love is practiced and taught. And rather than explaining the meaning of the gospel or arguing the reality of God, what is necessary is for us to say, with Philip, "Come and see."

But of course, if we are going to invite others into our families, into our communities, into our churches to "come and see," we have a big responsibility to make sure there is something to see. This is perhaps what God is always saying to us once we say "Here I am." We need to be loving enough, forgiving enough, welcoming enough that one can see a glimpse of the reign of God. We must. To recall a few more world-changing phrases, "speak the truth in love,"<sup>6</sup> "love our neighbors as ourselves,"<sup>7</sup> "not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels unawares."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 4.15

<sup>7</sup> Leviticus 19.18

<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 13:2

“Put on the armor of light.”<sup>9</sup> “Do not repay anyone evil for evil.”<sup>10</sup> “Continue in the Apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers.”<sup>11</sup> “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”<sup>12</sup>

These are also words of power. And if the words of our leaders and preachers have created and continue to chastise and improve our nation, these words of our God create and continue to chastise and improve our souls, our selves, and the community which is our true home.

Come and see!

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<sup>9</sup> Romans 13:12

<sup>10</sup> Romans 12:17

<sup>11</sup> The Baptismal Covenant

<sup>12</sup> Mark 12:30