

“Tingle Our Ears, Lord”
1 Samuel 3:1-4:1a and John 1:43-51
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I’m not much of an American football fan anymore but I do keep up a little. I did hear something about order being restored last night? Something about a big time whuppin’ put to the Denver Broncos. Something about the New England quarterback tying a playoff record with six touchdown passes? Now its true that Tom Brady put on a clinic last night, with a dazzling collection of well-run plays, but there was one play in particular worthy of the highlight reel. And that play, the play of the game, occurred even before the kickoff, when players from both teams dropped to one knee and implored God to let their team win this game. At that moment, I doubt that they were asking that the game end without injuries, or that if their team lost they could bear it gracefully. No, they were asking for divine intervention on their behalf to win that game. Since we know that God always hears our prayers, it seems clear that the conclusion we can take from last night’s football game is that the Patriots had more players praying harder, or at precisely the right moment.

Even if only evidenced by sporting events, we might still conclude that believers feel certain that God takes an active role in our everyday lives. But we all know that the place where perhaps more prayers are uttered than any other place in the world is on the runway of any given airport as passengers plead for God to let

this plane make its trip safely! And we implore God to answer our prayers in the hospital and before the final exam and in my case, before I asked my wife to marry me. As people of faith, we have to believe that God takes an active role in our lives, even if we are not exactly sure how it works. We have seen how God brings just the right people into our lives at just the right time, how God offers opportunities seemingly out of nowhere, how God heals people of cancer when the doctors have given up hope. Some might call it coincidence. I call it Divine incidence. One of my seminary professors liked to understand it as God's mischief. And one of his favorite questions to ask was, "What kind of mischief is God up to in your life?"

God was up to some serious mischief in the lives of Samuel, Eli, and the rest of Israel. God was up to some serious mischief in the lives of Philip and Nathanael, as we read in John's Gospel. It is from these stories and so many others in the Bible that we believe that God cares not only about geopolitics, but also about the number of the hairs on our heads, in my case no great challenge for God. We know that God answers prayers and brings victory, and restores order from chaos. In Samuel's day, all was chaos. The federation of tribes was in disarray, with each person doing as they pleased. The temple worship at Shiloh was corrupt, with Eli's sons, Phineas and Hophni defrauding the people when they came to sacrifice and raping the women who served at the temple. Eli, as the chief priest, is unable to put a stop to these abominations. And so suddenly, through Samuel, in this little story

of hearing voices in the dark and running back and forth, God announces a huge change in the status quo, beginning with Eli and his family, with consequences that will last for centuries. How big a change was it? Let's just say that the numbers never lie.

I've mentioned here before that numbers in the Bible nearly always have significance beyond their numerical value. And one of the most important of those is the number forty which is a huge indicator that something huge is about to happen. The situation after the forty is always radically different than before the forty. Forty days of the flood. Forty days by Jesus in the desert, forty years of Hebrews wandering in the desert; Moses on the mountain receiving the commandments was there for forty days. And all through the book of Judges, there were alternately forty years of peace, forty years of strife. It will probably not surprise you then to learn that Eli served as judge over Israel for 40 years. His time is up and something big is about to happen.

That something big is the complete transformation of Israel from a loose federation of tribes into a consolidated monarchy under Saul and David and Solomon, a system whose strengths and flaws lead Israel to great glory and awesome wealth but ultimately to political infighting and exile. Equally big is that Samuel will be the first of a long line of prophets who will be God's voice in calling Israel to task when it gets out of line. This story is not just about the call of Samuel. No, this seemingly cute little story announces a watershed in the history of

Israel. It is an announcement about the new thing God will do which Samuel will proclaim. God says to Samuel: “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make tingle both ears of anyone who hears it.” Tingle both ears, knock your socks off, blow you away - pick your colloquial expression, but know that God is going to do a new thing.

Now, human beings aren't always good at accepting new things. Our resistance to change may be matched only by our ability to adapt when we are forced to change. And even when the change is in our best interests, change is always a little scary. Choosing a new restaurant is one thing, and we approach it with excitement, scanning the menu for a new taste sensation. But choosing to call someone on the carpet when an office joke is at someone else's expense, is an entirely different animal. Choosing to sit with a lonely stranger in the high school cafeteria, instead of with friends, is a new thing most teenagers won't do. Taking those risks are new things most of us would rather avoid.

Sometimes I think that we are so resistant to change that we instinctively and figuratively close our eyes to what is uncomfortable or provocative, with the idea that, like little children, if we close our eyes no one can see us - change can't find us if we aren't looking for it. But our wishing for things to remain the same doesn't stop God from doing a new thing every now and then, even in our own little lives. On one hand we expect God to be active in our lives – at the fifty yard line, on the airplane, in the hospital – and on the other, we are a little fearful of divine activity

when we are not making a request first. We want God to make mischief in our lives - but only on our terms and when we are ready for it.

Whether we are ready or not, God is always doing a new thing in the world. Sometimes it is not always easy for us to see. We are some of the most stubborn of God's critters. So perhaps that is why God has given us this new thing we call the church, so that we might help each other see when God is doing a new thing in our lives. In our life together, we discover through the gifts brought by each of us, how God is working mischief in the world and in our living rooms. How is it that we know so much about Ethiopia and the new thing that is happening in Judith Hamje's life as her grandson's adoption has finally come to pass? Or the new heart Jessie's friend Doio received last week? Or the Education Plus Camps that are helping urban kids to experience something new? How do we know about these new things God is doing? Because we are Christ's church and we care about one another and we share the glorious things our God does. Our stubbornness is perhaps why it is that the church keeps a calendar, to remind us of the new things that God does lest we forget. Every year at Christmas we re-celebrate the Incarnation, and every year at Easter the resurrection. Those are reminders of the glorious new thing God does in Jesus Christ and reminders of the glorious new things God is doing in our lives every day.

But you'll remember that I said the story in Samuel was also about God's prophets who will tell us of the new things God will do. We know the biblical

stories about Nathan and Isaiah and Jeremiah and the rest, but we fool ourselves if we think that God does not still announce new things through prophets. This is a long weekend for many in the United States, and even some people here in Costa Rica. Government offices are closed on Monday. Mailboxes will be empty until Tuesday. As a nation, the people of the US have chosen to remember one of God's prophets who was chosen to proclaim God's new thing. We rightly remember Martin Luther King Jr. for his steadfast dedication to the cause of ending segregation, for his stirring speeches and high ideals. But sometimes I fear that Dr. King would agree that the church is losing sight of the new thing God called him to proclaim by focusing too much on the prophet and not enough on his message. I find prophetic even today, some words he spoke in 1956. King, after making a great case about the inevitability of God's new thing, felt the need to finish his speech in this way: "I am about to close now. But before closing I must correct what might be a false impression. I am afraid that if I close at this point many will go away misinterpreting my whole message. I have talked about the new age which is fastly coming into being. I have talked about the fact that God is working in history to bring about this new age. There is the danger, therefore, that after hearing all of this you will go away with the impression that we can go home, sit down, and do nothing, waiting for the coming of the inevitable. You will somehow feel that this new age will roll in on the wheels of inevitability, so there is nothing to do but wait on it. If you get that impression you are the victims of a dangerous

optimism. If you go away with that interpretation you are the victims of an illusion wrapped in superficiality. We must speed up the coming of the inevitable.

“Now it is true, if I may speak figuratively, that old man segregation is on his deathbed. But history has proven that social systems have a great last minute breathing power, and the guardians of a status-quo are always on hand with their oxygen tents to keep the old order alive. Segregation is still a fact in America. We still confront it in the South in its glaring and conspicuous forms. We still confront it in the North in its hidden and subtle forms. But if Democracy is to live, segregation must die. Segregation is a glaring evil. It is utterly unchristian. It relegates the segregated to the status of a thing rather than elevate him to the status of a person. Segregation is nothing but slavery covered up with certain niceties of complexity. Segregation is a blatant denial of the unity which we all have in Christ Jesus.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. is truly one of my heroes of the faith and I am not suggesting that we relegate him to a historical footnote by canceling this holiday. However, we do his memory a great disservice if we substitute his annual holiday for the hard work of speeding up the coming of the inevitable and helping to usher in the new thing which God is doing. The church cannot afford to fall victim to an illusion wrapped in superficiality. There are too many people who need God’s new thing that Dr. King announced for us to remain idle bystanders.

We believe that God is more than an idle bystander. If we expect God to be there for the airport runway moments, is it too much for God to expect us to be there when God inaugurates a new thing, be it the inevitability of desegregation, a Middle East peace accord, or the radical notion that we are responsible for caring for one another? Whether we have Monday free from work or not, let us take it as an opportunity to not only ponder the mischief God is up to, the new things, comfortable and uncomfortable, which God is doing in each our lives, but also to consider our role in speeding up the coming of the inevitable in which Dr. King had so much confidence. May the Lord guide our minds and hearts as our ears are tingled. Amen.