

I was here in spirit for some of the service last Sunday while traveling north from South Carolina. (Zoom is pretty incredible!) I was inspired by the message of the guest preacher Rev. Chip Robinson. It was about hearing a “calling” from God, how we all could be more alert to the ways God speaks to us ... how the boy Samuel, while serving in the temple, kept hearing his name, from a quiet but persistent voice, as he was trying to sleep.

The times were bad, Israel had many enemies, and it is said that the voice of God was very rare at that time... people wondered if there were much hope anywhere. Even the priests in the temple were not doing a good job. Well, Samuel was a miracle child, the child of Hannah who had many years of barrenness, but then prayed fervently for a child. Samuel served in the temple as a child, and grew in wisdom and stature. He became a judge in Israel; He followed God’s guidance in anointing the first king, Saul, and he found the young shepherd boy David who became the second and greatest king. Samuel was known to hear the voice of God, and is thought of as the next great prophet after Moses.

But the message of a prophet is often not comfortable; it often challenges us to change! The part that Rev. Chip did not mention last week was that what Samuel heard from God was that his mentor, the old priest Eli, and his household, were going to be punished because his sons were blaspheming God (being disrespectful of God), and Eli did not restrain them. Much of Jewish history seems to deal with leaders (like priests and kings) who were disrespecting the ways of God, and thus God needed to chastise or punish them to make changes in his people.

So we come to this morning’s readings. The later prophet Jonah also had a message of chastisement and coming punishment for the city of Nineveh. You may remember that Jonah did not want to *warn* that city, since he thought they should be

roundly punished by God. So he flees in a ship, gets tossed overboard in a storm, gets swallowed by a whale, but is spit out on dry land, then goes to Nineveh and gives them the warning message from God. I'm content to interpret the story of Jonah and the Whale as a legend or myth. Yet all myths are told to make a point, to express some truth! The simple lesson or teaching point is that Jonah learned that God is ultimately merciful... that Jonah's urging the Ninevites to change their (evil) ways, which they did, with fasting and repentance, caused God to refrain from punishing them.

So, to review... Samuel was a prophet who warned of punishment upon the house of priest Eli; Jonah was a prophet who warned of punishment upon the city of Nineveh; John the Baptist was the prophet in Jesus day who warned of harsh consequences if people did not change, and Jesus himself starts his preaching in Galilee, saying "The kingdom of God has come near: **Repent**, and believe in the good news!" Though we may shudder, the word "Repent" is not such a bad word. It is "metanoia" in Greek, which basically means a change of mind, or a change of perception. If we complain about how bad life is, how unlucky we are, sometimes we just need a change, especially in attitude or thoughts. The power of the mind is great. We remember the famous words of Paul to the church at Rome: "Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the *renewal of your minds!*" In other words, it starts inside: have a change of heart and a change of mind. This will of course lead to changed speech and changed actions.

We know that change needs to take place at both societal and personal levels. I'll just briefly mention at the societal level: the scourge of war. The arguments over who started it, or who is more evil, seem pointless to me. No side is without sin, without flaw or foul. In the Middle East, sure, the Hamas group may indeed have been more evil by *starting* the killing, with genocidal fervor... but

after a time It is just a fact that killing breeds more killing, in a cycle of escalating retaliation! Therefore it is also a calling, a sacred calling, to be the first to start negotiations toward peace! I had a long talk with Anna Smulowitz, our Jewish chaplain friend, who shared with me the words of holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel... that genocide, strictly speaking refers to pre-meditated, pre-planned killing... so that what Hamas did was more accurately the genocide. And that Israel, who surely is inflicting horrific damage now, actually started their retaliation as self-defense, trying to target only the terrorists, not as a pre-meditated genocide of all Palestinians. As with all wars, we could argue forever about who is more justified in killing and their tactics, but the amount of bloodshed and tears on both sides calls for those who will say Stop! Stop the vengeance! Stop the cycle of retaliation! Come to the bargaining table!

International relations are so complicated; I'll close with a couple more personal examples of change of heart and mind. I saw a documentary at the Firehouse on MLK day, and the story was told of a woman who came up to Martin in a rally and began to spit on him and hurl insults at him. Martin could have snapped back at her with righteous judgment, but with his "transformed" mind, in the spirit of Jesus, in the spirit of forgiving love, he reportedly said to her, "Ma'am, you are too beautiful to be that mean!" (And reportedly, she found a chance to apologize to him later!) Transformation can happen; seeds of goodness are in everyone.

Another amazing story that I heard recently is about a Jew and a KKK leader; the story went viral and can easily be found online. Some thirty years ago, a young Jewish Cantor (worship singer) named Michael Weisser moved into a new home in Lincoln Nebraska. He got a phone call from the local Ku Klux Klan leader named Trapp saying "Listen Jew, you're going to be sorry you moved in!" Weisser was convinced that human nature is essentially

good and the goodness can be reached. He heard from the police that Trapp was a diabetic amputee, in a wheelchair, with plenty of anger that got unleashed on many non-whites. So he began to call back Trapp and leave messages on his answering machine like “Think about all the hatred you are involved in; you are going to have to deal with God one day.” And “Why do you love Nazis so much? Don’t you know that as a disabled person, you would’ve been among the first to die? And “There’s a lot of love out there, and you don’t seem to be getting any. Don’t you want some?”

Well, eventually Trapp called and said “Why are you harassing ME, and what do you want?” Well Weisser then offered to help this amputee with things like grocery shopping! He declined, but a bit later, he called Weisser and said he wanted to get out of the path he was on but did not know how. Weisser and his wife then went to his apartment and had a long talk, ending with Trapp asking them to take his KKK white robes and other white power paraphernalia with them. He began to apologize and make amends to other victims; he joined the synagogue, and Weisser and his wife cared for him in their home when his health really got bad. Not long thereafter, he was buried in a Jewish cemetery. There is a book about it called “Not by the Sword: How a Cantor and his family transformed a Klansman.”

Transformation. Change. Repentance....which is not a bad word, it just asks us all to make changes for the better, changes toward more goodness, more kindness, more love. As Rabbi Weisser said, “There’s a lot of love out there in the world!” If we are not finding it, maybe we need to hear Jesus’ words again: “Repent, (change), and believe in the good news of God.” God IS good, and surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life! Amen.