

Sermon: Year B, II Epiphany

Texts: I Samuel 3:1-20

I Corinthians 6:12-20

John 1:43-51

In the Jewish tradition of morning prayer, the same words begin every day.* They are supposed to be the first words spoken, a verbal form of breakfast, breaking the fast of silence that night and sleep induce. They are three words that compose a very simple phrase: “thankful am I.”

The substance of this statement is significant enough, especially for the many of us who tend to greet the morning with any number of other groans, moans, and possible expletives as the alarm sounds in the dead and cold of winter. Imagine how life might be different for you if, by force of habit and then, eventually, by habit-sharpened senses, the first, immediate moments of every day evoked unabashed words of sheer gratitude. That alone could be astonishing. But in this case, the specific form of the expression is just as important as its substance.

If the Hebrew phrase were translated into colloquial English, we might merely say: “I’m thankful” – a statement easily said and easily understood and easily left behind in the wake of the many other things that quickly occupy us. The Hebrew, however, clearly and strongly emphasizes an opposite order. Thankfulness is literally the first word. In so far as one is awake, in so far as one is able, coming out of the deep quiet of slumber, to say anything, no word can fittingly be spoken before this one, essential recognition. To be aware at all is to be delighted and wonderfully indebted. A world is being given – not of our making but of our free receiving.

Here we must be conscious of the supreme place of speaking in the Jewish tradition. God speaks, and speaking is God’s fundamental action. God’s speaking calls forth all of creation. God’s word brings about what it says. As Isaiah noted, not one word returns to God empty – they “accomplish that for which they are purposed.” The prophets proclaim God’s word. Jesus was God’s word incarnate. And we, human beings, have the capacity to speak because we have been made in the image of God. To initiate the day by stating thanks is, then, in fact, to speak pure truth. It is to say to God that we see with perfect clarity the world that God is providing.

Only then, and only secondarily, can we add that it is we who are thankful. “Thankful... am I”: this is the proper order. Thankfulness precedes us, and it endures, and I, being given this day, am consequently given the grace to live into it. How different this is from our common statements, which presume that we ourselves are in the place of privilege. “I am thankful” can just as well be rendered “I am pleased,” or “I am satisfied.” The order sets the world according to our judgment. We are the center. Everything revolves around our all-consuming egos. But this is precisely what is not said. It is overturned: “thankful am I.” This one line of prayer is appointed each morning so that we may awake to an entirely different world, so that the way we see and approach everything may be completely transformed.

This morning we have heard an important echo of this prayer in the Old Testament lesson. Older English translations of the story from Samuel kept the same tight form in translating Samuel’s reply to God’s call. In the darkness of night a voice beckons, ambiguously, mysteriously. Samuel hears his name, and twice he answers back with this familiar response: “Here am I.” It probably

sounds to our ears like a vestige of quaint Elizabethan politeness. We might be more disposed to any number of less elegant replies of a generally monosyllabic form, ranging from an inquisitive “Yes?” to an returning “Hello?” to the obviously irritated “What!” But here, again, the translation is key. Samuel announces first of all that he is present. He has moved into a place where he can listen. His reply is an awaiting. “Here,” he says. It’s a statement of attendance, in the full meaning of this word. He is explicitly focused on what is being asked, attending to another’s voice. This acknowledgement of placement is the privileged word, and only after this does he mention himself. “Here... am I.” “What would you like... of me?”

One repeated phrase, three words put in distinct order, tell us far more than we would normally perceive from this story. This phrase and its positioning of Samuel opens space for God to be heard. The story, after all, begins on an ominous note: “the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.” There was, instead, a common assumption. God does not speak. People are not called. Faith has no real vitality. Even in early Israel, the tendency was to relegate God to that most inert of realms: tradition. The priests did no more than keep a deeply ingrained habit that long ago had lost its luster. Prayers were said. The temple was casually revered. But the real substance of life was to be found elsewhere, in other pursuits. There was plenty to be excited about – political intrigue, national struggles, personal advancement. There’s always some place where lucrative deals are being made, where power is being brokered, where someone is making it big. It just wasn’t connected with God. What name or what invocation could be more staid than this?

Nevertheless, Samuel places himself within that great pause of simply being available. Waiting is given priority, trusting that something is coming. There is no hint of impatience in Samuel’s reply. He’s profoundly settled because he has no interfering agenda of his own. God’s word is heard because, under Eli’s instruction, being present to hear took precedence over all other engagements and interests. God’s vision was disclosed, the future for Israel, and the advancement of God’s covenant.

It’s worth our pondering whether the form of our lives matches the form of these statements. The quick answer, which has been consistent throughout the ages, is probably not. The world interferes, all the issues and matters that seem so immediate and pressing. Giving thanks is highly circumstantial, and there’s not time enough in the day to do what we want, much less something as abstract and as murky as to make ourselves simply available for God. There’s often not enough time in an entire week just to keep a few hours of Sabbath. Our words and our statements begin with I, and our world and time and life feverishly follow suit.

And yet, at root, the phrases that define the persons we admire most as saints are exactly these: thankful... am I, here... am I. Tomorrow we will observe a holiday for Martin Luther King, who was, perhaps, the greatest catalyst for racial equality in our time. He inspired a movement that led to tremendous social change. He did so with fierce courage and indefatigable hope. He battled many foes without resentment and without resorting to an opposite and equal hatred. He knew how to speak, and when he spoke something of the image of God shone through him. And all his actions and all his words seem to point back to a two-fold grounding. He was not afraid because he was thankful for each day. He never fell to despair because his work was to be open to God’s gospel in his time. And our world is significantly different because of this.

The same could be noted of Mother Teresa. In the darkest slums of Calcutta she manifested love and care, and even to the dying, divine hope. Though almost everything that greeted her each day protested against this, still she persisted in transforming the world by thanksgiving and by spending her life for the nearly lifeless – being there, in God’s name.

And the same holds for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who for years countered all the vicious brutality of Hitler’s rule with a gospel of deep fellowship and love, centered always and purely on God’s word to us, that breaks all the designs of our own violence. Imprisoned and eventually executed, still he seemed to those around him to be wonderfully free of soul, and his own comportment gave life to them. He greeted each day with gratitude and with the knowledge that, even held captive, he could still be available to God.

“Thankful am I.” “Here am I.” By the practice of these words and our own, conscientious embodiment of their form we all have the opportunity to change our world. And we have the opportunity to make one more small but magnificent phrase evident – surprisingly in our modern world without raising suspicion or rancor or disgust. We have the opportunity to elicit joy and open the way toward peace instead. One phrase. Three words: “God with us,” – said, now, with the same notable form and emphasis. “God... with us.” Thankful am I. Here am I.

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* I am indebted to Peter Ochs for much of the content given here about morning prayer in the Jewish tradition. This is part of his emphasis in his excellent essay, “Morning Prayer as Redemptive Thinking,” which can be found in Liturgy, Time, and the Politics of Redemption, edited by Randi Raskover and C.C. Pecknold.