

“Our Call, Our Hope”

1 Samuel 3.1–10

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 18 January 2009

All you need to do, if you really want to ratchet up your fear, is open the newspaper or tune into a news broadcast. And some reporters and editors seem almost to relish delivering bad news with juicy headlines. Maybe it seems that “the word of the Lord is rare in these days and vision is not widespread.”

And it’s been a difficult week here at Plymouth, too. I was faced with telling my two clergy colleagues that we’re facing a cut in pay. To be honest, I’ve been on an emotional rollercoaster this week, trying to think about how budget cuts will affect Plymouth’s mission and ministry, how they will affect Julie and Sharon, and how they will affect my family. And in the same week, we’ve been meeting with our capital campaign consultant, Bea Stoner and a dedicated group of volunteers who are committed to helping us raise over \$800,000 to pay of the debt for the building we all currently enjoy.

It’s easy to devolve into a place of fear with so much bad economic news all around. *But that’s not the whole story.*

Let me share a story with you that I heard from Peter Thomas, a member of the church I grew up in. Peter’s father had been a parish minister during the Great Depression, and things were very, very tight for his family growing up. Those were the days when clergy got paid mostly in produce and poultry. His father had presided over a funeral for a very wealthy family in the congregation, and clergy typically receive an honorarium from a family when they perform a wedding or a funeral, so they had expectations of a generous financial gift. And after the service, the matriarch of this well-do-do family presented the minister with a pair of ladies’ kid gloves nicely presented in a box. The minister thanked them kindly and went home with the box of kid gloves under his arm. When he arrived home, the family seemed incensed that this family that could afford to help financially didn’t. But, Peter’s father was more philosophical, and said, “We need to accept every gift in the spirit in which it is given.” That was the end of the story for a good many years. Decades later, when Peter and his siblings were clearing out the attic, they found those nice kid gloves, still in the gift box in which they had been given. And someone decided to try them on, just for the fun of it. But when they tried to insert their fingers, something was blocking the way. Into each one of the ten fingers of the glove the wealthy family had inserted a rolled-up \$10 bill. Think what \$100 would have bought that family in the 1930s! And that was the gift the wealthy family felt called to give Peter’s father and his family.

So, I’ve had to remind myself that there is more at stake than my financial wellbeing and that of my family. For me, remembering that story and working with Bea Stoner and our new capital campaign team got me into touch with my call to ministry. There is a reason that I gave up a higher income in the private sector to go back to grad school again and become an ordained minister – and that’s because I experienced a sense of being called by God to lead congregations like Plymouth – to help them walk humbly with God and discover the fullness of life. It’s not always easy, but it is rewarding, and I know that it’s what I’m meant to be doing.

The best definition of a vocation, or calling, I’ve run across is from the wise Presbyterian writer, Frederick Buechner, who writes, “It comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, and means the work a person is called to by God.

There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest.

By and large a good rule for finding out is this: The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing cigarette ads, the chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a), but probably aren't helping your patients much either.

Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”

Some of us are called to ordained ministry, and others as teachers or psychotherapists or engineers or parents or businesspeople...but each one of us has also been called to be a part of this congregation.

One of the best ways calling has been described is by Jean Clift, a Jungian analyst and Episcopal priest. She writes that “vocation is for every person and involves lives lived in fullness, whether short or long, whether famous or unsung, remembered or forgotten. The miracle of human life which I have observed convinces me that we each matter to the world, whether the world ever knows it or not. We can make a difference, and living our most true lives begins when we begin to see what God sees in us.”¹

What if we all could see in ourselves what God sees in us? What hidden potential is locked away within you? What does God see in you that you haven't yet been able to summon to the surface?

Yesterday morning, as the capital campaign team was meeting, one of our members said that what struck him most as we moved into the capital campaign was the tremendous wealth in the congregation...not just the financial assets, but the tremendous human assets that are all around us. He said it reminded him of what was truly important: family, faith, and community. And those aren't going away anytime soon. There is tremendous potential in this congregation that God is just waiting to summon forth or to call.

Hope can reside in the potential – the still untapped potential – that God sees in us as individuals and as a congregation and that God will call forth as we live out our faith more fully.

In fact, if there were not some tough times and some setbacks, some unrealized potential that is not currently present in our lives, there would be no room for hope – to room for something better to emerge.



Dreams are important, as the story of Samuel's call reminds us. Dreams can be where we hear the voice of God.

On August 28, 1960, the world was a very different place. There was even more room for hope in the arena of Civil Rights than there is today. A towering figure emerged from among the titans of the Civil Rights struggle, and on that day 45 years ago he said these memorable words: “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’”

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

¹ Jean Dalby Clift, *Core Images of the Self*, pp. 88-9.

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.

I have a *dream* today!

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 – 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, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; ‘and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.’

This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with.

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.”

In the space of my lifetime, we have gone from segregation and lynching to electing the first African-American president of the United States. Regardless of whom you voted for in the election, Barack Obama’s inauguration is a historic occasion.

I think it speaks volumes about the progress of American culture that, for all our shortcomings, we have changed enough in 45 years to evolve into a nation that elects its leader not by the color of his skin but by the content of his character.

Perhaps in terms of economic news, we can say that the word of the Lord is rare in these days, and dreams and visions are not widespread. *But that isn’t the whole story.*

It is a time to call forth the Samuels – the prophets –in our own time. It is a time for each one of us to dare to hope, to dream dreams and have visions, and when we are called by God, to respond with the biblical refrain: “Here I am.” Amen.