

“Discernment, Prayer and Confirmation”

Rev. Ben Heimach-Snipes
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1 Samuel 3:1-10

John 1:43-51

God of love and justice, you reveal yourself to your people across time and place. You open eyes that did not see you. You open ears that refused to listen. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God. And may we discover anew our calling from you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today we rediscover stories of God calling on God’s followers to become some of the bible’s greatest leaders. God comes to Samuel in an age when “the word of the Lord was rare, and visions were not widespread.” There was no pressure on Samuel to hear from God or speak in tongues - quite the opposite: there was no expectation at all that God would be present in Samuel’s life. From this position of assumed isolation from God, God shows up to share a challenging message for Samuel’s community. And Samuel’s response from the beginning is, “Here I am. Speak, for your servant is listening.”

God comes to Nathaniel as well, in the Gospel of John. Jesus literally decides to walk over to visit Nathaniel. When Philip invites Nathaniel to join Jesus in his ministry, Nathaniel is skeptical because of where Jesus came from. How could the Messiah come from Nazareth?

And yet, Jesus accepts him and Nathaniel is immediately convinced of Jesus’ authority because Jesus could spy on him with his power of omnipresence. I wonder if he used that ability very often!

These men were called by God into particular work for a particular time. We too are called by God into our particular vocations for our particular moment. And the way in which we discover our calling can be just as awkward and surprising as it was for Samuel and Nathaniel!

Today I want to explore how discernment, prayer and confirmation in community can help us to connect with our calling as individuals and as a congregation. I invite you to explore with me the particular story of the African American community in Montgomery Alabama as they struggled into understanding their calling to organize the Montgomery Bus Boycott. This was not only the calling of the community, but also a calling for each specific person who participated in the dangerous work of organizing against racial segregation in the 1950’s.

As I share this story, I invite you to imagine yourself as part of the narrative. Who do you relate to? Where would you be in the story? What surprises you? This story is not our calling, but I want to celebrate it today as we continue to discern our own calling as a community.

My retelling comes from Taylor Branch’s book, *Parting the Waters*.

On December 1st, 1955, only a year into Martin Luther King’s ministry as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Rosa Parks left the Montgomery Fair department store late in the afternoon for her regular bus ride home. All thirty-six seats of the bus she boarded were soon filled, with twenty-two African Americans seated from the rear and fourteen whites from the front. The driver, seeing a white man standing in the front of the bus, called out for the four passengers on the row just behind the whites to stand up and move to the back. Nothing happened. The driver had to finally get out of the driver’s seat

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to speak more firmly to the four African American passengers. “You better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats,” he said. At this, three of the passengers moved to stand in the back of the bus, but Parks responded that she was not in the white section and didn’t think she out to move. When the driver said he would arrest her himself, Parks replied that “he should do what he had to do,” she was not moving.

She spoke so softly that the driver would not have been able to hear her above the drone of normal bus noise, but the bus was silent. The driver notified Parks that she was officially under arrest and went to alert the police.

At the station, officers booked, fingerprinted, and incarcerated Rosa Parks. It was not possible for her to think lightly of being arrested. She had reason to expect not only stinging disgrace among her own people but the least civilized attentions of the whites as well. When she was allowed to call home, her mother’s first response was to groan and ask, “Did they beat you?”

Deep in panic, her mother called E.D. Nixon’s house for help. Nixon organized the local chapter of the NAACP of which Rosa Parks was the secretary and mother to the NAACP youth. It wasn’t until Nixon summoned the help of his white counterpart, Clifford Durr, that they were able to learn that Rosa Parks was charged with violating the Alabama bus segregation laws.

Unlike the preceding two arrests of young African American women in Montgomery for challenging bus segregation, Parks was not given any accompanying charges for assault or disorderly conduct.

The two men arrived together at the Montgomery jail, along with Durr’s wife, Virginia. Virginia had first known Rosa Parks as a seamstress she hired to hem dresses for her three daughters, and had thought well enough of Park’s NAACP work to recommend that she spend a week at one of Myles Horton’s interracial workshops at the Highlander Folk School. Parks had done so, returning to say that her eyes had been opened to new possibilities of harmony between the races. Virginia Durr was indignant that the fearful humiliation of jail had now fallen upon such a person.

Officers fetched Parks from the cellblock as Nixon was signing the bond papers. She and Nixon and the Durrs were soon inside the Parks home with her mother and her husband Raymond, a barber. The atmosphere was as charged as the taciturn Rosa Parks could ever allow it to become, with much storytelling and rejoicing that the immediate danger, at least, had passed.

Nixon asked the husband and mother to excuse Rosa briefly, so that she could speak privately with him and the Durrs. He put the question to her: would she be willing to fight the case, the way she knew they had wanted to fight the earlier bus arrests? Rosa Parks did not have to be told twice what he meant, but she knew that it was a momentous decision for her family. She spoke alone with her mother and then with her husband. The proposal upset both of them. Raymond Parks came nearly undone. Having just felt primitive, helpless terror when his wife had been snatched into jail, he could not bear the thought that she would re-enter that forbidden zone by choice. There was hope that the arrest could be forgiven as an isolated incident, but if she persisted, it would be deliberate. It would be political. “The white folks will kill you, Rosa,” he said, pleading with her not to do it.

Rosa Parks finally announced her decision. “If you think it will mean something to Montgomery and do some good, I’ll be happy to go along with it,” she said. She spoke with Fred Gray over the phone

that night who agreed to be her lawyer for the case. Fred then called several of his friends on the Women’s Political Council, including Jo Ann Robinson. Robinson was among the leaders of the women’s group who served on Reverend King’s new political affairs committee at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Like most professional women among the African Americans of Montgomery, she had no trouble identifying with Rosa Parks, even though she herself drove a car and seldom rode the buses. As soon as she heard from Gray that night, Robinson called her closest friends on the council. All of them responded like firefighters to an alarm. This was it.

Casting off the old rules about how Black women should never travel alone at night in Southern towns, Robinson and her friends met about midnight at their offices at Alabama State, each under the pretext of grading exams. They drafted a letter of protest. “Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown into jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus and give it to a white person,” they began. They revised the letter repeatedly, as ideas occurred to them. “Until we do something to stop these arrests, they will continue,” the women wrote. “The next time it may be you, or you or you. This woman’s case will come up Monday. We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses on Monday in protest of the arrest and trial.”

As they worked, the women felt urgency closing in upon them. They realized that the best way to notify the Montgomery Black community, given their lack of access to newspapers or radio, was to leaflet the town through the churches and the contacts of the Women’s Council. The best place to get copies of such an incendiary letter printed, they realized, was precisely where they were - at Alabama State, on the mimeograph machines. This would require stealth, because the college was funded largely by the Alabama legislature. If white people ever learned that state-employed teachers had used taxpayer-owned facilities to plot a revolt against segregation laws, heads would roll and budgets would surely be cut. So the women resolved to finish the mammoth task before daylight and never to speak of what they had done. They soon lost all thought of going to bed that night.

Jo Ann Robinson decided to call E. D. Nixon to let him know what they were doing. Nixon then called King in the middle of the night, plunging directly into the story of the Parks arrest, telling King of his determination to fight the case and the plan to stay off the buses on Monday. He asked King for his endorsement.

“Brother Nixon,” King said quickly, “Let me think about it and you call me back.”

Nixon said fine. He’d make some other calls, but he wanted King to know that he wanted to use Dexter for the meeting that afternoon. Its central location made the church convenient for people working in downtown offices. “Of course,” said King - he just wanted to think before endorsing Nixon’s specific plan.

By the time he talked to King again, King was already making his own calls to other clergy and organizing for the boycott.

When the sun rose, about fifty of Montgomery’s Black leaders assembled in the basement of King’s church, where they approved the plans for Boycott and supporting Park’s case. All undertook to spread the word. King and others retired as a committee to draft a new leaflet that was essentially a condensation of the one already being circulated by the thousands by the Women’s Political Council.

These are the origins of the Montgomery bus boycott - marked by the bravery of Rosa Parks and

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the creativity of the Women’s Political Council who responded to the call to transform a regular December day into the beginning of a movement. They responded out of their desire for justice and love to envelop and carry a violently racist society into a new age of civil rights for all. They were able to see the brilliant gifts being handed to them by a rule following bus driver and a senior leader of the NAACP. These are the origins of the Montgomery bus boycott - marked by fiercely loving women and the men who followed them - men like Martin Luther King Jr.

This story demonstrates that the story and calling of Martin Luther King Jr. is not the story of one monolithic Black man who stood in the face of institutionalized racism. No. The story of Martin Luther King Jr. is the story of generations of African Americans who found hope in God to work toward their common liberation from the shackles of slavery, oppression, economic exploitation and legalized racial discrimination. It is the story of women and families, doctors and lawyers, bus drivers and seamstresses who risked their own lives to lift up King and confirm a calling upon him that was indeed a calling for the entire community and a calling for the entire nation.

When we celebrate MLK this weekend, we are not only celebrating this one man. We are also celebrating the ancestors and companions that brought King into the public spotlight. We are celebrating the story of Rosa Parks, that began long before King joined her chapter of the NAACP. We are celebrating women who had been organizing for years, for generations - building piece by piece a community that could sustain the bold hope of overcoming the Jim Crow legal system. I’m sure many people that we celebrate with King had doubts about any future without segregation, but they still participated in the hope. They participated in the hope found in children. They participated in the hope expressed in Jesus Christ. They participated in the hope that every nation will allow justice to run down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. They participated in a hope in which all will do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. They participated in the ancient practice of our faith - to put our hope in God.

We sometimes find our callings simply because of where we are. Whether we discover a burning bush along our path, whether we learn that the Son of God decided to visit our town to look for disciples, or if we just so happen to be at the church in the middle of Montgomery when Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat, it takes discernment and prayer and confirmation in community to respond in the moment to live out that calling.

Discernment, prayer and confirmation in community empower us to live out our calling from God. So how do we practice discernment, prayer and confirmation in community?

Discernment is indeed a strange and awkward practice in its own right. We are practicing discernment as a congregation right now. Meeting each month to share with each other who we believe that we are - and who we believe we can be with God.

The next two months of our discernment are totally focused on our neighbors. Who are they? How might we be called to serve them? To create space for them? To learn about and understand them? To be in relationship to them?

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And additionally, what gifts do we bring that might serve a greater purpose in this community? What gifts might we share in this congregation? What gifts do we have the hope to dream about for this community? Discernment is a strange and wonderful process.

Discernment in this congregation has led many to seek out a life in ministry. Discernment in this congregation has led to empowering ministries that enabled adults to complete their educations and children to discover new worlds. Discernment in this congregation has led you to calling me into this pulpit. You are not a stranger to the strange and wonderful process of discernment.

And knowing the challenges of discernment, Prayer becomes an important practice to ground us in conversation with God and lift us out of the anxiety of the world to experience the hope of God in our dreams for the future. Prayer can be both speaking with and listening for God. Like Samuel, who kept hearing the voice of God in the night, we too can assume a spirit of humble listening and say, “Here I am. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

We can be listening in prayer for the calling of God, but we often require the voices of our community to help us put the pieces together. Like Eli, finally realizing that Samuel might not be imagining voices, but instead could be hearing the calling of God as a voice in the night. Our community, like Eli, can confirm with us how God is moving in our lives and support us in taking new steps in our journey of faith - whether that be inviting God to speak, or planting a garden for our food insecure neighbors, or teaching a cooking class for our vulnerable youth, or preparing an empowering worship service for our community, or carpooling to work to demonstrate our power over a racist bus seating policy. We must look to our community for support and guidance to bring our calling into focus and give us the encouragement to embark on a new journey with God.

We are a community that confirms a calling on each other. Let us engage in this divinely creative process in this new moment - a moment where we might relate to Samuel’s age where “The word of the Lord was rare, and visions were not widespread.” These may seem like dark days where hearing the days news can be traumatizing to say the least.

In these days, let us practice hope in God. Let us practice the hope that every nation will allow justice to run down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. Let us practice a hope in which all will do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Let us practice hope in discernment, prayer and confirmation in community that can empower us to live out our calling in God. Let us practice our hope in God this day.

Amen