

Soul Force

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Readings: I Samuel 3: 1-10; John 1: 43-51

I.

*The word of the Lord was rare in those days.
Visions were not widespread....*

It was a very long time ago. It happened when guns had not yet been thought of; plumbing did not yet exist. Our world is full of news reporters, but in theirs, poets and bards still wrote history, or rather they sang it and chanted it and found its shape. The world of Eli and Samuel was a different world from ours. It was a smaller world, a world in its own way more secure. And yet vastly more dangerous than ours... It was a world full of mystery, full of fear and full of hope.

It was long ago and far away, but at least in one regard, it was a time not so unlike our own time: Visions were not widespread. Visions were rare, and it seems that the capacity for vision itself was diminishing. At least Eli, a seer who was growing quite old, couldn't see too well any more.

In that time, a young boy named Samuel had been set apart by his mother Hannah to live a life consecrated to God. His mother had said she was loaning him to God, for life. He was a priest in training, living in a holy place, a high place. And he was being raised by the old priest Eli as a son. He was being raised by Eli, whose two natural sons had become corrupt and greedy in their ministry.

In the middle of the night one night, as he lay next to the Ark of God, Samuel heard a voice, calling him by name. He assumed it to be Eli... And went running. Now, my children when they were little occasionally came running to me in the night, or called out my name from their beds; invariably, half asleep, I knew they had been dreaming- I sent them back to bed. Some things aren't much different over a few thousand years; it's what Eli did back then. But a second time Samuel came, and then a third, until at last even sleepy-eyed Eli figured out that someone else was calling. Finally he gave some practical advice: "If the voice calls you, you shall say, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

There was an unexpected voice, a surprising voice, trying to get the attention of God's people at Shiloh. It took a young child, too innocent and inexperienced to be able to tell God's voice from his stepfather's; it took an old man with the grace to accept that someone else might have clearer visions than his own, even when it was a harsh word of judgment and truth, for him, and for his posterity.

So began the ministry of Samuel, a prophet in Israel.

II.

It was a time not so long ago, in this land, this same land where you and I dwell. It was a time like these times though, when visions were not widespread. In this land, in that time, there arose one person whose vision, rooted in an encounter with the living God, caught the imagination of many, and succeeded in stirring the conscience of the nation. One person spoke out, giving witness to a clear voice he had heard calling him in the night.

He was never satisfied to stop with a truth that was convenient or popular. Like Samuel, he had to speak the truth as he heard it. So when others wanted him to stick to civil rights, he insisted on denouncing the Vietnam War. When others would have preferred him to stick to American issues, he made the connection with oppressed people of color around the globe. Maybe it was that stubborn unwillingness to stick to the safe or the sure winner that made us believe he brought some truth that went beyond convenience, beyond self-interest, some truth with some God in it.

I remember when my children, in the first grade, started bringing home interesting spelling words. King, and peace, and dream, and love, and prize. Because they humored me I started teaching them some spelling words that get left out by the spelling list from school: Baptist, Preacher, Justice; and c-i-v-i-l d-i-s-o-b-e-d-i-e-n-c-e. As they got older, through the years they also needed to learn, sometimes through harsh and real experiences of their own or of their friends, words like Prejudice, Hatred, Racism. And they remain good spellers. They know how to spell Courage, Persistence. Today, I am convinced that both of these once small children, now young adults, are spelling these words with their lives. And the words can be summed up in one short phrase: *Soul force*.

Rev. Dr. King did not have his visions in isolation: older figures helped to shape him. One of these was a Black preacher named Howard Thurman. Another was a Russian Christian named Leo Tolstoy; and a third was an Indian prophet named Mohandas Gandhi, from whom he learned the methodology of mass nonviolent action. At the heart of his message was an Indian word he coined, *satyagraha* meaning "insistence on the truth", or in another way of saying it, the force of the soul's truth: call it *soul force*. Gandhi, heavily influenced by the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and by the

methodology of Jesus in resisting the powers of his day, had come to believe that the only way to resist oppression faithfully was by resisting the forces of power and money and hatred with the superior force of truth and love.

Nonviolence is often assumed to be the only resort of the weak: but Gandhi insisted that soul force is stronger than any other force in the world.

III.

In a thoughtful opinion piece published in the Albany Times-Union, Pedro Perez, retired first deputy superintendent of the New York State Police, points out that despite “the election of President Barack Obama, the appointment of Eric Holder to U.S. Attorney-General and the many other men and women of color holding high office.... This progress has not changed the lives of many blacks, and Latinos living in the United States. Poverty, economic instability limited educational opportunities and, more insidiously, the abuse of power by some police officers and departments decry those advances.” He continues, “We need to have a serious dialogue about race, because it still matters. We cannot allow our cultural, ethnic, political and/or philosophical differences to continue to delay this conversation, just as we cannot allow those differences from ensuring just laws are passed and enforced equitably. Truth and justice trumps ethnicity.”

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Almost sixty years ago, a young Baptist preacher stepped into the spotlight of history to hold up with his words, his heart and his body the principle that truth and justice are indeed a force more powerful than guns or axe-handles or dogs. We live now in a time in great need of this kind of strength.

In recent months, we have seen the resurgence, in fact, of organized mass action based on the strength of the soul, not of arms. Have there been others for whom anger trumped soul force? Yes. But that does not lessen the spirit or truthfulness of those who have opted to fight prejudice with words, and the abuse of power with nonviolent witness. And yet, Pedro Perez is right: this kind of force, the power of difficult truth spoken in love, is needed not only in the streets of Ferguson or New York City or in the favelas of Brazil or the slums of India, for that matter, but also in our living rooms, our board-rooms and in the halls of government.

Soul force is about finding not only principles within but also deep courage. I know that one cannot do this alone, because I have, with other men and women, had to face police dogs and on one occasion a contingent of hooded members of the KKK, spewing hatred. If we stand alone, our fear will undo us. We need each other, in community, even when the conversation is hard.

When Samuel went to Eli the morning after his conversation with the Most High, Eli asked him what he had heard. But Samuel was afraid to say anything at first, because it was a word of judgment on the corrupt practices of Eli's own sons. It took an old man's encouragement to get Samuel to speak up, speak the hard truth. Soul Force takes that kind of encouragement. There is a place for each of us. For some it may be in the streets. For others it may be a word of encouragement spoken to a young person trying to find truth's voice for the first time. Whatever our role, let us begin with the recognition that there is indeed still a God who sees injustice, and who points us to a better way. There is still a force, despite all mistaken perceptions of weakness, still a force capable of taking on the guns and the sticks, the words of insult and the power politics. IT is a force strong enough to create in us the capacity for integrity and straightforwardness, bringing a word from the Most High.

We live in a time when it is tempting to say we have no resort but to fight fire with fire or violence with violence. Acts of terror and the abuse of power alike tempt us to give up, in a sense, and respond in kind. But this is not the way of Jesus. Gandhi was right, despite the fact that his followers failed to follow through in the end. King was right, despite the contrary claims of an assassin's bullet in the midst of a campaign for sanitation workers in Memphis.

Christ calls us to find this force within and among us, this Soul Force, this power of truth, this compelling love, this deep justice. So sisters and brothers, let us look within, look in the newspapers, look in our bibles, look to one another, and listen. Listen to the voice that calls in the night! Until at last we hear, and have the courage to say, Speak, for your servant is listening.”