

Epiphany 2B 2012
Reconciling in Christ Sunday

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Holy Disruptions

The Bible is, among other things, a saga of holy disruptions. God speaks, calls, acts, appears in strange guises, sometimes threatens and sometimes nudges. People respond, in one way or another. Today's stories chronicle some of those encounters. Jesus tells Philip, "Follow me," and Philip packs his bags. Philip finds Nathanael and says, "Come and see." Nathanael insults Jesus' home town but nevertheless agrees to accompany Philip and check Jesus out. While Nathanael is walking to Jesus, Jesus cryptically describes him as a person who cannot be deceived. When Nathanael asks how Jesus could possibly know anything about him, Jesus tells Nathanael, "I saw you...." Samuel hears the sound of his name on the breath of God and says, *Hineni*—"Here I am."

Hineni is not a casual utterance made by distracted minds. *Hineni* is the threshold over which we cross into an unpredictable, life-altering encounter with God. Naomi Hirsch, Cantor for the Yale Center for Jewish Life, says that *Hineni* is an integral part of the Jewish liturgy during Rosh Hashanah. It is spoken three times: the first time, as Abraham's address to God, his holy Parent; the second time, to Isaac, his son, and the third time, to himself as he realizes the cost of his response—the horror of his son's sacrifice; the act from which he was spared.

Hineni. This utterance pinpoints a person's physical, spiritual, moral and intellectual location. To say *Hineni* is to say, "It is I who respond, not someone else." "These are my thoughts, not someone else's, masquerading as mine." "I am here, not someone else."

When God calls Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, God says, "Where are you?" *Hineni* is the response God is hoping to hear. God wants Adam and Eve to say "Here I am," and God wants to hear that response in the present tense. But Adam hides himself with words, just as he had hidden his body with leaves, and couches his response in the past tense: "I heard you; I was afraid of you, and I hid." He refuses to tell God where he was in the here and now.

Samuel answers God in the present tense: "*Hineni*." "Here I am." In all fairness to Adam, Samuel didn't realize that The Voice that kept disrupting his sleep belonged to God. He thought Eli, the elderly priest, was summoning him. After it became clear that The Voice didn't belong to Eli, Samuel probably became a little bit concerned. The Voice calls a fourth time. This time, Samuel answers as Eli had instructed him: "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening." He didn't like what he heard.

The Voice of God Almighty announces that Eli's priestly house is "lost beyond any ritual rescue."¹ God would be giving Eli a pink slip; his priestly days are numbered. With a sweep of

¹ Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa and James D. Newsome, eds. *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year B*. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) 107.

the Divine Hand, the “entire symbol system on which Israel had relied”² would lose its legitimacy. Poor Samuel. In the morning he would have to relay this message to Eli.

After what was probably a sleepless night for Samuel, Eli summoned him. Once again, Samuel says, *Hineni*—“Here I am.” Eli admonishes the boy to tell the truth, the *whole* truth, (and nothing but the truth, so help him God!) Samuel complies. Samuel’s repeated willingness to say *Hineni* to God by relaying a painful message becomes the vehicle for the spiritual restoration of a nation.

We are all called. By name. Jesus calls Nathanael despite his bigotry, prejudice, and smart mouth. Jesus calls Peter and teaches him how to live into his name. Jesus has called you and me. What he wants from us is our *Hineni*; our “here I am,” our “here *we* are as a congregation...speak, for we are listening.” Our corporate *Hineni* will determine the scope, shape and character of this congregation’s ministry. Considering the gifts and strengths of this congregation, which includes a deep and genuine welcome for members of the GLBTQ community (GLBTQ refers to people who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer) you might, for example, want to explore the possibility of becoming a Reconciling in Christ congregation.

Thomas Merton says, “Unless [God] utters himself in you, and speaks his own name in the center of your soul, you will no more know Him than a stone knows the ground upon which it rests in its inertia.”³ We have choices about the way we will respond to The Voice. We can exist as “inert stones.” Or we can consent to become God’s living “*hineni* stones”—called, equipped and willing to do whatever God asks and go wherever God wants to send us.

² *Ibid.*

³ Thomas Merton. *New Seeds of Contemplation*. (New Haven, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani, Inc., 1961) 39.