

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House  
January 15, 2012  
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Readings & Bulletin: [www.janhus.org](http://www.janhus.org)

FIRST READING: 1 SAMUEL 3: 1-20

GOSPEL READING: JOHN 1:43-51

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Sermon Notes: *The Anxiety of Doubt*

[I open with one minute of silence. No explanation. Just standing there in silence.]

So. One minute exactly of unexplained silence. Sixty seconds. What went on? Did you think there was something wrong? Did you wonder if I had suddenly lost my place in time and space? Did you think that maybe you should do something – speak up, step up, walk out?

Did your mind start racing a bit as the silence went on? Did you feel anxiety, that displeasing feeling of concern rising? Worry...dread...

It is, after all, all around us. This morning's headlines in the *New York Times*, reflect it, for the most part. in all the news and media services:

- “Fear of Civil War Mounts in Syria as Crisis Deepens”
- “Boehner Faces Restive G.O.P. and White House Attacks”
- “Theology Feeds Christian Unease with Romney”
- “Israelis Facing Rift over Role of Women”
- “Divers Search Ship, Cause of Crash Unclear”
- “Gunmen Take Police Building in Iraq”
- “Palestinians Talk with Israel and Hamas”

And the list goes on. Added to the barrage of media that is filled with concerns – our own preoccupations:

- Employment
- Finances
- Family and Members of the Family
- Health Concerns
- Loss and Grieving
- More...maybe even God?

And here we sit in church, Sunday morning, remembering Dr. King, reading about Samuel and Eli, Jesus and his disciples, all on one of the coldest mornings of the year – wondering about people spending the night out in the cold and how might we pay the rising heat bills, if we are lucky enough to have heat.

It may be true that on given days, we trudge the road to happy destiny with a heavy load of anxiety, even dread. We become worn out enough, at times – or just overwhelmed by knowing all we do and all we know needs to be changed – that we shut down a bit. We turn off the TV, if we even watch one; we set aside the newspapers; we leave bills unopened for a while, turn off the computers...we seek a respite from it all...

But when even silence can cause anxiety, where do we go but back to the noise?

And when in the silence or the noise we call out to God and all we get is silence or more noise...well, it's easy to begin to wonder, "where, if God is – is God?" And where does it all leave us?!

And, if we know God is – if we know it; how do we feel it? How do we get God from our head and all these things going on that wrack our brains with problems and thinking and thinking and problems – how do we get God into the heart, in ways we can *feel* God, almost in defiance to a world that requires thinking, analysis, progress, success, rewards – all chalked up in some way in our heads that score our life like some living report card that no one will ever read but that we, nonetheless, can find demanding and obsessive?

Paul Tillich, a philosopher and theologian lived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries was an eminent author and professor; he came to the US in 1933 after being dismissed from the universities he taught in in Germany because of his opposition to the Germans.

In one of his best known books called: "The Courage to Be" he addresses a world filled with doubt and the loss of meaning and purpose for humankind and God, alike. In one part he states that "The courage to be [who we are, faithful, willing] is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt."

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There are biblical stories time and again about being lifted up from doubt and fear, being "saved" after giving up all hope by a God who refused to stop loving us, even when we had given up on God, loving one another, or even ourselves. We have been known to get pretty down, now and then.

And then, seemingly out of nowhere, one would rise up, placing all they had and all they were at risk and into the hands of God, and made a decision to "go at it" – whether *it* was the insurmountable odds of opposing armies or the cries of Hannah praying to God for a son. A son who she promised to God if only she could bear him.

And she did, Hannah bore the son Samuel who opens this morning's readings, a faithful servant to the high priest (we believe) Eli. He was given into Eli's care around the age of three, completing the narrative of her prayers to Eli that many years before in the temple.

Out of her anxiety and bitterness we are told, out of her doubt and sadness she gives it all up. She entreats God by "pouring out her soul" in spite of the anxiety or fear she feels, in spite of the torment she has received from her husband Elkinah's other wife who bore children easily, in spite of it all – even in the midst of the greatest of doubt she came to God with a promise – give me a child and I will give the child over to you.

Was all she wanted to know was that God had heard her, used her, did she want to know this so much that she was willing to give over her child? The Song of Hannah, much like Mary's Magnificat, says it all: *'My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God.'* How many times do we just want to know that God has heard us, and when we do we exalt in our own way of knowing such?

And this morning, it is God who comes to Samuel, her son, with a vision and call that set into motion the grand narrative of Samuel, Eli, the making of kings, Saul, David, and Jonathan – the house into which Jesus would eventually be born, and which carries forward here, today.

But in here there is a shift. A shift that is ours, too, the change from God hearing our petitions to us hearing God's call.

The call of Samuel, as was the call to others before and since, always has a response. No call has ever been *imposed* on someone by God. God always waits for the answer, which if "yes" has always been something like the words that Eli gave to Samuel to say: "God, I am your servant ready to listen." Ready to say, "Yes."

Preparation is important; being ready to say, "Yes" to God is more important.

For many of us, the readiness to say, "Yes" comes after a time of resistance. The "Yes" can be the answer to anything that at its core comes closest to who we are in our relationship to God at the point that those two things have the clarity and oneness that only such an exchange with God can have.

This *oneness* frequently occurs at a low point of despair or a high point of anxiety. I have known both of these. By the 1980's, in my early 30's, I was relatively successful in business and had a wide open future ahead of me in a smart and growing company. The trappings were all around, the cash and prizes, as we sometimes say. But the terrible conflict of being gay and closeted, the dulling of the pain with years of drinking had finally brought me to my knees. God had pretty much abandoned me, in the sense that the God I knew then was a punishing God, a God who wanted me to be other than gay (that's what every one told me). I had no way to change that ever worked, the drinking that was way out of hand was an escape – a form of self-medication, and if there was a hell, I was resigned to it.

It was a horrible existence. It was hell. And then one day, when it had gotten bad enough, I turned to that God or some God out there somewhere and asked for help. Real help. I remember the words, they were simple and never said with more heart: "Please help me."

They were spoken only between me and God. I was ready to ask. And I was ready to listen. And ready to act. And over time the answer came with others who had learned how to live a life free of the bondage of self and booze. And a relationship was formed between God and me that was always there but had been long forgotten. I was willing to give up everything to get back, right with God and right with me and others. I had found the God I always knew; not the God that others had tried to *impose* on me!

For all these years since then, whatever prayers I have always included the simple prayers of "Thy will not mine be done" and "Thank you" somewhere in the praying.

And I can still get all caught up in the anxiety of what is going on; trying to change things; and often that self-driven ego can get me back to a point where I just need to say, OK. I give up. Show me what you want me to do and then give me the courage to do it.

And these tasks these responses to God's call can be grand in the simplest of ways...stopping to help someone with packages. I've trained myself to say, "Can I help you?" especially to strangers in need. It can be in making sure the heating system is working so we stay warm. It can be in any situation, at any time, in any job, in any relationship: God, your will not mine be done.

And, before long, sometimes before very long the God that appears is the God that is well above and beyond anything that I want or is anxiety producing. It is the God before whom only I can stand with myself. It is the God who directly says to me, "will you help me?" awaiting my answer. The God who says, "If I call you, will you go?" And the best of answers, I think, is the "Yes" before I know where "the go to" may be.

I think Jesus was talking a bit about this this morning when he said to Nathaniel – "You call me Son of God just because I saw you [in a vision] sitting under a fig tree?" You haven't seen anything yet. This is more than about being a seer or charlatan or even a prophet. This is about you and the power of God in you and the universe. Wait till you see what happens when that idea becomes clear to you and you start to practice living with that in your heart and your mind.

And Nathaniel followed. And Samuel followed. And we follow. All of us, at times, with the God that is there when everything else is gone, when the headlines are print on paper, and the newscasts are electrons on a screen – before and beyond the heartache and the loss --God is there and calling each of us in ways only we know in our hearts.

On this day that is actually the anniversary of the 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. it is fitting that we think of his life, not just his words, but his life that was placed into the care of God's hands. Not all of us will have a national holiday in our honor. Not all of us will be executed by the mass hatred that fueled an assassin's searing bullets. Not all of us

will be the leading figure in civil rights, religion, and peace that Martin Luther King was. But all of us will have the same impact with our lives according to God's plan – if we turn ourselves over to God with the simple request or statement: "Thy will not mine be done." And then be ready – not to keep a scorecard – but to be used as God will use you and me – all of us.

On the front of the bulletin the piece I chose for today's reflection is from a speech Martin gave at Ebenezer Baptist Church about five months to the day before he was killed. "So precious that you will die for it." He talks about stepping up to God's call, even to the point of being willing to put your life at risk – not because your life means so little, but because your life means so much.

There's another way that I thought about this this morning. Maybe it was the words that Jesus knew from God the Father/God the Mother, who instilled in Jesus the truth that God, Spirit, and Jesus all knew: "The people before you are so precious that you will die for them" not because your life means so little but because theirs means so much to us.

That's a God well beyond any anxiety or doubt; that's the God in us and here now. The next time you have a moment of silence – try to remember such truth and maybe more than peace will emerge from what was once a place of anxiety and doubt."