

## Here I Am

Sermon 86 | Greystone Baptist Church | January 17, 2021  
1 Samuel 3: 1-20

In early 1960, Ruby Nell Bridges was one of 6 young, black children to pass the test which would determine whether or not they could attend an all-white school.

Despite performing well on the test, two chose to remain in their existing schools and three opted to attend another school, McDonough No.19; leaving young Ruby as the sole agent of integration at William Frantz Elementary School, New Orleans, Louisiana.

On November 14th of that year, Bridges and her mother were escorted into her new school by four federal marshals. Reports suggest that the two spent most of that first day in the principal's office because of the chaos that was ensuing all around them. There were threats on Ruby's life, there were real consequences that her family faced. People threatened to poison her food, one white woman showed up outside of the school to protest holding a black baby doll in a coffin.

All the teachers – except one – at Ruby's new school boycotted, refusing to teach any students while a black child was on the roles. Ruby's father, lost his job as a result of his participation in the efforts to integrate the schools, putting his entire family, including Ruby and her four younger siblings into financial turmoil.

The grocery store where the Bridges were used to buying their food refused to serve them and Ruby's grandparents who were sharecroppers in another state were forced off their land... all of this because a little black girl went to a white elementary school.

These consequences and threats might have deterred many of us from persisting. Thankfully, that wasn't the case for young Ruby Bridges and her parents. When the call came out from the NAACP, Ruby's mother, Lucille volunteered their family not only because she wanted a better education for her daughter, but because she wanted to "take this step forward... for all African-American children."

Lucille understood that the risk was great, she knew that there would be trouble, and yet she still answered the call, because she understood the bigger picture and she wanted her family to do their part, whatever little thing they could do, to make things right for all who were suffering the heavy yoke of segregation.

As young Ruby took those famous steps outside her new school, she answered the call to participate in something much bigger than herself, saying not just with her mouth but also with her feet: "Here I am."

Samuel was also pretty young when he first heard the voice calling in the night. The scripture says he was just a boy, ministering under Eli, the chief priest... that he did not yet know the voice of the Lord (vs.1 and 7).

In fact, when he heard his name called: “Samuel, Samuel” he was sleeping in the Temple but ran to Eli’s room to see what his teacher wanted. Three times this happened and each time Samuel responded with the Hebrew phrase, “*hineni*” translating “here I am.” It’s a term repeated throughout scripture as faithful people say “yes” to God’s call.

Abraham says *hineni* when God summons him to bring Isaac to the mountaintop as a sacrifice. Jacob says *hineni* when God calls him home to face his brother Esau whom he’d cheated out of his inheritance. Moses says *hineni* when God calls him back to Egypt to liberate his people. Isaiah says *hineni* when God gives him a word of prophetic judgment to proclaim in the ears of the king.

“Here I am,” is a brave and courageous thing to say to God, at least if our ancestors have anything to say about it.

If we heed the words of scripture and remember those who have faithfully led the way, it seems that saying “Here I am” will lead us down a path of change and discomfort, a path of resistance and sacrifice, a path of recognizing that our own personal gain pales in comparison to God’s kingdom trying to break through. If we heed the words of scripture, saying “Here I am” is a bold thing to do.

Samuel’s story is no different. After presenting himself three times to Eli, when he thought it was the priest calling, God calls out to Samuel a fourth time and this time, Samuel says, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”

What follows is a difficult calling much like the ones given before:

*See I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken... I am about to punish his house forever for the iniquity that he knew... because his sons were blaspheming God.*

God’s words signal a season of change for the temple and all who worship there. No more will Eli and his family reign as priests of Yahweh. Samuel will rise, ushering in a different kind of religious leadership, spending his days traveling throughout Israel administering justice and speaking on behalf of God.

You might imagine this was a bit of a rude awakening for the people who were used to the priests staying put in the temple, ignoring the blasphemy and greed running rampant throughout the kingdom.

Samuel’s arrival in Bethel, and Gilgal, and Mizpah might not have been so welcome seeing as he called them to change their ways and get themselves right with God. It might have been easier for the new prophet to just stay put and turn a blind eye as his predecessor had done. It might have been easier for him and for the people. But Samuel had already accepted the difficult task, the moment he said, “Here I am... Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”

There comes a time for each of us who have chosen to follow Christ, when we have to face the difficulty of calling we've been given. The challenges are often as unique as the calls themselves, designed to pull us out of ourselves and into complete faith that God knows what God is doing with our lives.

Sometimes God calls us to give generously, sharing all that we have with those who are in need. Over and over again I have seen the members of this congregation step forward to give food and school supplies and masks and money to meet every need that arises.

Sometimes God calls us into relationships we may never have imagined possible. Through ministries like Buddy Break, Together for Hope, Habitat for Humanity, Cedar Point, Welcome House, and the Construction Ministry, we have built strong connections with people from all walks of life and every corner of this world.

Sometimes God calls us to be truth-tellers, using our voices to advocate for those who have been ignored, oppressed, and often forgotten. Through education efforts like book groups, Wednesday night programs, and Sunday School discussions we have begun expanding our circles, intentionally looking for ways we might be used as agents of justice and wholeness in this world. Just a few months ago we took another step forward in this way by creating a special team, the Spirit of Justice, to explore and learn about ways we can grow in this regard.

These certainly aren't easy and comfortable all the time, but this is Greystone becoming the church that God is calling us to be. Together we are leaning into God's collective calling on our lives as we seek to more fully live the Gospel of Jesus in this world.

But participating in the church's mission isn't the only way we are called by God. Each of us, individually, is called to go and do and become the person God has called us to be. In fact, for the church to fully live into our collective vision, it takes each of us being willing to say in our own ways: "Here I am, speak, Lord."

This weekend we remember a young Baptist preacher who, like Samuel, heard the call of God and recognized that his calling would lead him to create change in some ways that change wasn't exactly welcome.

Like Samuel taking the priesthood outside the Temple and bringing God's word of judgment and justice into the communities of Israel, Martin Luther King, Jr. knew that things needed to change throughout the United States and he eventually came to understand that God was calling him to be the mouthpiece of that difficult change. In the face of great resistance and leaving behind all that was comfortable, Martin Luther King, Jr. echoed the words of Samuel, Abraham, Moses, and Isaiah saying, "hineni, God, here I am."

His commitment to the causes of Civil Rights and black freedom landed him jail on more than one occasion. He faced criticism from all directions... even within the church.

While he was incarcerated in Birmingham, he wrote a letter responding to a statement made by a group of eight white clergymen saying that while racial injustice did exist, King and his colleagues should *wait* for a more convenient time and that they should *let things play out in the courts, rather than continuing their tactics of organized, non-violent, peaceful protest.*

Thankfully, King did not relent but he persisted in his work, understanding that his calling was indeed difficult, dangerous, and unwelcome... but that it was God-given. King had already said, “Yes, Lord, here am I” when he stepped into the waters of baptism and declared himself a follower of Jesus. And King said, “*Hineni, Lord, Your servant is listening!*” when another, more specific calling came for him to join and lead the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. King already knew where his identity and allegiance would lie and so he also knew he had to stay the course, no matter the cost.

Here, on this weekend in which we remember Martin Luther King’s life and legacy, it is easy to look back and to celebrate his courage, his dedication, and his prophetic words. But it is important to humbly name that in the moment, as events were unfolding and the movement was underway, good Christian people, like you and I, weren’t so sure about him, he made us uncomfortable and so we often stood in the way, like those 8 Alabama clergymen asking him to wait for a better time.

As we celebrate King’s life and legacy this weekend, perhaps we might also celebrate the ways in which Greystone has boldly embraced ministries that others would have deemed “too risky” or “too inconvenient.” Considering women for your highest ministerial positions, even as our denomination was splitting over that very issue... building partnerships and diving in head first to embrace immigrants and refugees without worrying about whether or not their paperwork was in order but embracing each of them as children of God, worthy of our love... creating a place of respite for our Buddy Break VIPs and families even though it is a huge commitment of time and energy, knowing that God has called us to these specific ministries and we have said together: *Here we are... there’s no better time than now.*

Remembering these two great Americans, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ruby Nell Bridges especially in light of the story from 1 Samuel that we read a few moments ago, calls us to consider our own calling. *How is God calling us – individually – in this specific moment – to live our lives for Christ? What is our piece of the God-movement that we are called to pick up and carry? What is the work of love that has been entrusted to us? And are willing to carry on, even when times get tough?*

Friends, the good news is that God isn’t asking us to be Martin or Ruby. But God is calling us to be *who God created us to be:*

Chrissy, Lou, Terry, Anna, John, Kim, Sandra, James, Kay, Susan, Tim, Pam, Heather, David, Betty, Steve, Linda, ... I wish I could name us all because each and every one of us are beloved Children of God.

And each and every one of us is being called by God to bring about a little piece of God's kingdom here and now, through truth and love, peace and justice, humility and forgiveness every day and in our own unique ways.

So really, the question is...

*How will we respond?*