

**The Second Sunday after the Epiphany**  
***RCL Year B***  
**January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

**Episcopal Church of Our Saviour**  
**Mill Valley, California**

**Which Way is Up?**  
**The Rev. Richard E. Helmer**

Many of you are members or have heard about the social networking online site, Facebook. I signed up a couple of years ago to join some conversations with friends and colleagues as well as our youth, for whom Facebook is about as basic now as owning a cell phone or having an e-mail address. One of the features of the site is you get to update your current status:

“Richard is *fill in the blank*.” You can imagine having fun with that. “Richard is at the beach.” “Richard is snoozing.” “Richard is feeling like he wants to be somewhere else.” Or one of my more vague perennials: “Richard is feeling wistful.”

The other day, while feeling confused – honestly I can’t remember quite about what – I wrote, “Richard is wondering which way is up?”

I don’t know if it’s my wearing the collar or just the way the stars aligned (or perhaps a bit of each), but for the first time I could remember, I received a number of comments from Facebook friends about my status.

One tried to solve the problem for me: “Up is in the opposite direction of gravity,” she wrote, “Drop something heavy and aerodynamic and observe where it goes. That’s down.”

Another wrote sympathetically: “Up is the only way to go when you’ve hit bottom. It’s a struggle but with God’s help -YOU CAN MOVE UP, UP, & AWAY.”

Yet another commented: “My suggestion is check out the night time on a clear night, look towards the sky, and look for stars. There you’ll find up.”

Truth is I’m not sure I needed an immediate answer to my confusion. Sometimes our path forward is not as easy as a “yes” or a “no” or a definite and clear decision. Sometimes discerning God’s will doesn’t work as easily as solving a simple problem.

We hear this wisdom in today’s Hebrew Scriptures story about Eli, with his ne’er do-well sons, and the young, eager boy Samuel, when they are mystified by what they are hearing. The nub of the story isn’t in Eli figuring out that God’s voice is summoning Samuel. It’s

elsewhere. And yet, true to form in our American problem-solving culture, three friends were trying to fix my confusion for me – to make it clear “which way is up.”

One of them a bit later followed up sounding concerned: “Anything we can do to help?” she kindly wrote. I was tempted to write back, and probably should have done, now that I think about it, “Pray!”

Like many folks in this part of the world, I frequently fret over being right or wrong. Being wrong means risking getting attacked by those who disagree with me and judge me lacking. Being right risks smugness on my part and an unhealthy sense of superiority. Both are spiritual traps.

This weekend, as we commemorate the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., through a turbulent time in our nation’s history and prepare for an historic inauguration on Tuesday, many of us might be given cause to wonder about the nature of calling. In all the great stories of national and even local leaders, we forget too easily that even their paths weren’t cut-and-dried every step of the way, illuminated by absolute clarity where each decision was marked by the voice of God telling them exactly what to do. It’s a fluke of history that hindsight tends to make people sound more definite, more certain than they really were in the moment. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of only a very few – perhaps only one – mountain-top experience where he thought he recognized God’s voice. And that was not in the high halls of policy-makers, before the Washington Mall, or even in a church pulpit. It was late one night at the kitchen table after he received a death threat by phone.

We have to be reminded that faith and calling are not always about getting “it” right, whatever “it” might be. In fact, faith is rarely about getting anything right. It’s about showing up. It’s about responding, even in our sometimes backwards or upside-down ways that embarrass us at times and vex us at others. Sometimes, like Samuel, like Martin Luther King, Jr., we learn the right direction by simply answering God’s call again and again – by simply showing up and trying to get it right, even if we get it wrong. By showing up, even bewildered and confused.

Frederick Buechner’s famous definition of call is “Where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” It’s quite beautiful, isn’t it? But even without mentioning perfection or being right, it implies we really know what our deep gladness is, or that we can identify with God’s acuity the world’s deep hunger. Frequently we get a glimpse of one without the other. And sometimes we are shooting in the dark with guesses on both counts. This is our challenge, every bit as much as it was for Eli, who was about to be eclipsed by God’s hand, and Samuel, who was to grow up to anoint kings, for the first ordinary folk like you and me who became disciples when God in Christ came walking by, for Martin Luther King, who was to change the course of the future for a people.

So how do we know when we have a grasp of God’s call? How do we know God’s voice? This is particularly prescient in our time, when economic pressures and grim news tend to

push us into tight corners. We want to know we are making the right decisions in hard times. We want to know we are selecting the right path when confronted with a fork in the road or even an impossible set of equally painful choices. But our questions over what's right and what's wrong in such decisions are often met with a terrifying silence. God's silence is sometimes even worse than our own – its infinite emptiness seems to hollow us out inside, leaving us yawning to the sky for spiritual rain, a single word of guidance to hang on to, an affirmation that we are on the right path.

But the graceful answer to our questions of calling are often not the “yes” or “no” or “right” or “wrong” like a bolt of lightning from the sky. Rather, the answers sing to each of us as we read from today's psalm: today's psalm with its reminder that we are marvelously made, each of us. With its reminder that God's knowledge of us – just like God's knowledge of Eli, Samuel, the first disciples, and more contemporary heroes like Martin – is infinitely greater than the knowledge we hold for ourselves, let alone others.

And the striking grace is that we are held in that infinitely wise knowing. . . even when we aren't sure where God is calling us, even when we aren't sure which way to choose, even if we aren't sure how ends will meet tomorrow or next week, or next month, or next year. Even when it comes to life and death matters and our moral vision falters and our steps become uncertain. Even when we worry over what will become of friends who depart or family who go on before us. Even when we fret whether we are right or wrong, when we fret which way is up.

We are held. We are made by hands that love us. And our ends and beginnings are seen long before we even begin to comprehend either.

That's good news, it seems to me, for difficult times such as ours. Difficult times where we want to know where God is calling us, or what God is calling us to do. Sometimes the answer to that question – perhaps more frequently than we realize – is simply that God is calling us to be right here, right now – to show up fully in place and the present, like Samuel repeatedly running after the voice in the temple, not knowing where it would lead; like the disciples following after Christ day after day on the winding, dusty road that goes over the horizon; like a preacher from Georgia agreeing to be swept up by the swirling tides of history.

And that God is simply calling us to be. Because God loves us. And that requires fewer answers and fewer attempts to be right, and instead much more deep listening and living – living into the love that loved us before time.

*Amen.*