

Second Sunday After Epiphany (B/RCL)
1 Samuel 8.1-10
January 18, 2009
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

“We’ve had a miracle on 34th Street,” NY Governor David Paterson said at a press conference on Thursday afternoon. “I believe now we’ve had a miracle on the Hudson. This pilot, somehow, without any engines, was somehow able to land this plane....” (“All 155 Aboard Safe as Crippled Jetliner Crash-Lands in the Hudson,” Robert D. McFadden, *The New York Times*, Friday, January 16, 2009, A24.) The secondary headline read, “For Terrified Survivors, a Miracle”. Those on board that US Airways flight that ditched in the Hudson en route from LaGuardia to Charlotte a couple days ago frequently mentioned **prayer** in their after-action interviews. One fellow named Alberto Pinero talked about hearing the pilot’s command,

“... ‘Brace for impact,’ and that’s when I knew that we were going down. I could see the water getting closer and closer... Everyone kind of looked at each other and said some prayers, you know... I said about five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys.”

And then the plane hit the water. “I expected something to hit me, some kind of explosion... When that didn’t happen, it was a big relief.” (“Text Message: ‘I Landed in the Hudson’,” James Barron, *The New York Times*, Friday, January 16, 2009, A25.)

I’m sure “big relief” is quite an understatement! When that plane hit the water and neither broke up nor sank, many, many prayers were answered. My guess is that a prayer of some kind was probably offered up by every single person on that plane and every onlooker who watched with bated breath out of high rise windows on either side of the Hudson, or from cars on the George Washington Bridge as the aircraft roared by a mere 900 feet overhead.

I got goose-bumps when I read the coverage, and felt tears of gratitude welling up because such a tragedy, so close to home, had been averted. When’s the last time we saw the words “death toll” paired up with the number “zero”?? Thank you, thank you, Lord, that we’re celebrating instead of mourning the outcome of that failed flight. Thank you for being there

when we call upon You, no matter how long a lag time there's been since our last spiritual SOS from whatever our version of a locked car or a downed plane has been. You've hard-wired us so that in our greatest need we instinctively know where to turn and we find You there.

Mr. Pinero chose to recite the Our Father and the Hail Mary in the face of his crisis, telling us how ingrained **they** are in his mind and heart and tipping us off what faith tradition he comes from. Other people choose other prayers. One of our Holy Trinity members was working in a building alongside the Twin Towers on 9/11. She and many, many co-workers were shunted into the airtight computer core of that skyscraper to wait until emergency responders felt it was safe to give the green light to leave. She spoke afterwards of reciting Psalm 23 over and over and over again, a mantra that helped to quell the panic that she felt.

What a gift, to know precious prayers and Scripture passages by heart so saying them is second nature when we're so frightened we can't even think to make up a homegrown, spontaneous prayer. In those scary times and places when we can barely remember our own name, memorized prayers and Bible verses help us to remember **God's** name.

The 40 or so youth in Confirmation Connection have just begun to study the Lord's Prayer. They sat in these pews a few weeks ago as one of our adult guides, Terri Restucci, sat in front and asked them to listen closely as she prayed the Lord's Prayer. I think the kids were settling in for a snooze, thinking they'd heard this a million times before and could unobtrusively tune out. Imagine their surprise when Terri prayed, "Our Father" and a loud, clear, deep voice responded from on high, "Yes??"

Okay, the voice came from "on high" as in "the choir loft", not "the clouds", but it was still pretty impressive 😊. Throughout the praying of the Lord's Prayer that night, we heard a God-like voice interrupting, interjecting comments, setting up a dialogue instead of the usual monologue that the Lord's Prayer seems to be. Usually **we** do all the talking. With God audibly responding, we were all forced to listen, too. We're given two ears and just one mouth, we

reminded our confirmands. We should listen at least twice as much as we yak. Since prayer is communication with God, it's not just **talking**; it's also **listening**. If someone we know **always** does **all** the talking, we don't call that person a good communicator. We say that person monopolizes the conversation, which isn't anything any of us wants to hear about ourselves. If we want to become experts at prayer, if we want to deepen our relationship with the Lord, to be in closer communion with God, we need to spend **at least** as much time listening as talking.... We need to memorize and echo Samuel's words in this weekend's lesson from the Book of First Samuel: **"Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."**

It's very interesting and an important tip-off in this story that God chooses to speak to Samuel, the child helper, rather than Eli, the adult priest. Samuel, of course, assumed that Eli was the one calling his name in the middle of the night, since he and the boss were the only two people staying in the tent where the ark of the covenant was kept. And Eli, of course, assumed that Samuel had dreamt that someone called his name out loud, since **he** hadn't and it was just the two of them bunking there. Surprise, surprise, though, Someone else **was** there, after all: the LORD. Eli wasn't a wise father, we learn in First Samuel (because he knew of his sons' shenanigans and didn't stop them from stealing or being scornful of the Lord and the Lord's people), but Eli **did** have the spiritual wisdom to realize God was communicating with little Samuel, and to counsel Samuel to position himself to hear: **"Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."**

I hope that's the kind of open-ended prayer that the survivors of the "miracle on the Hudson" are praying this weekend. I hope they're asking God to show them why they were in that place at that time, why their lives were spared, what God would like to teach them, what meaning the Holy Spirit would like to make out of that freak event, how God would like to bring good out of the trauma. I'm sure they've been contacted by lawyers and news magazines, wanting to make money in one way or another. I'm just as sure that God is trying to get through

to them also, with another kind of message. If they can be as open as Samuel, positioning themselves to hear God's voice, saying, **“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,”** they will be blessed with life-giving insight and end up with much more of a story to tell.

Life is so much more than meets the eye. When we prayed the Nicene Creed throughout the Advent and Christmas seasons, we confessed our belief that God is Creator of both “the seen and the unseen.” Much that is **real** is **invisible** to us, including the air that we breathe and God's presence beside us. Much that is **spoken** to us by God is **inaudible** to the ear, but hopefully not to the heart. As Mr. Pinero was frantically praying, “Our Father,” God was answering, “Yes??” As **we** pray, “Our Father,” either unthinkingly **or** passionately, God is answering, “Yes??”

The simple, heartfelt, humble invitation, **“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,”** can deepen our prayer life immeasurably. If we truly believe that God is at work in our lives, doesn't it make sense to ask what God is up to?? We all have questions about twists and turns in our lives, especially the painful ones. We're allowed to ask, **“Why, Lord? What were You up to? What are You up to now??”** I frequently add the request, “Lord, please speak loud enough for me to hear You.” Without suggesting that God programmed a flock of birds to fly kamikaze-like into the engines of that Airbus, I'd say that the attention of its crew and passengers was focused laser-like on God when the engines died. ‘Seems like a golden opportunity for them in the wake of the miracle that followed to pause and say, **“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”** **May we** do the same, and not be surprised when God answers.

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

