

Sermon - Epiphany 2, Year B
Samuel and the Voice of God
1/14/23

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The scripture passages in our liturgy today from the Old Testament and the Gospel both invite us to consider a vital question: from where do we expect to hear the voice of God? First Samuel begins with Israel at a crucial moment just before a radical transformation. “The Word of the Lord was rare in those days. Visions were not widespread.” The man who will become a great prophet – the one who will anoint the first kings of Israel – he is still a boy, and a rather lowly one at that. Samuel is like an acolyte, holding candles for the priest and mopping up after the temple work of the day has been done. He is literally a doorkeeper. It is unlikely that anyone besides the priest even remembered his name. And yet a voice comes to this small child in the night. The Lord is calling him. When Eli, the priest, realizes what is happening, he gives to his student the words of a perfect, humble prayer: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

In the Gospel from St. John, Jesus is traveling through the northern region of the Galilee, and he approaches a man, Philip, and bids him to follow him. When Philip receives this startling call, he proclaims to his friend, Nathaniel, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathaniel replies with skepticism: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” It can be easy to miss that this is a joke. You may not think there are many jokes in holy scripture, but this is certifiably ancient Galilean humor. “Can *anything* good come out of *that* place?” Can anything good come out of Illinois? Can anything good come out of the Minnesota Vikings? Simply insert whichever place you don’t like very much, and you’ll have the sense of it. Nathaniel is questioning whether everything that

Philip has told him about the fulfillment of the prophets could *possibly* be found in one who comes from such a backwater place as Nazareth.

No one expected the Word of the Lord to come to a child tending the door at the temple. No one expected the Word of the Lord to be an apparently ordinary laborer from Nazareth. And yet God's wisdom blossoms in the unlikeliest of places, people, and circumstances. It does not matter that Eli is the high priest. It does not matter that Jerusalem is a far more illustrious city than a backwater like Nazareth. It does not matter that popular culture sometimes sets us up to expect God's voice to come in a booming cloud of thunder down from the sky. God speaks and calls and blesses us where he will. It is our gift to remember this and to open our hearts to him.

Both the story of the calling of Samuel and the story of the calling of Philip and Nathaniel show us that God speaks in unexpected places and through unexpected people, and they also reveal to us how we are called to respond. When Eli perceives that the Lord is calling to his acolyte, he instructs him: "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" Your servant is *listening*. Everything begins here. The voice of God can only be truly discerned and known if Samuel is listening. Even in this time where the word of God was rare and visions were not widespread, even here the utterance of God will resound when the one to whom he comes is prepared to listen.

The nineteenth century French priest, St. John Vianney, wrote that "When it's God who is speaking...the proper way to behave is to imitate someone who has an irresistible curiosity and who listens at keyholes. You must listen to everything God says at the keyhole of your heart." What a perfect and delightful image – like a little child desperate to hear what the grown-ups are saying on the other side of the door. We must be silent. We must lean into the surface of the door with our entire being. We must long for what we might hear more than anything else in the

world. We must begin each day and each prayer with the proclamation: speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

When Nathaniel questions the wisdom (and perhaps the sanity) of Philip who declares the arrival of the Messiah from Nazareth, Philip bids his friend, “Come and see.” Come, and *see*. See for yourself! This act of perception is repeated as Jesus replies to Nathaniel, “I *saw* you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Before we are even capable of beholding Jesus, he beholds us first. Jesus continues: “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these... Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” This is a renewal of the story of Jacob in Genesis 28:18, where “he dreamed that there was a stairway set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” In following Jesus, Philip and Nathaniel will behold the fulfillment of a promise that has been planted within their hearts since the days of their ancestors. Just come and see.

Sometimes it can feel like these late modern days are rather like the days of Eli and Samuel: the word of the Lord is rare, and visions are not apparently widespread. But it is vital for us to look within our own hearts and ask ourselves: from where do we expect the voice of the Lord to come? Are we waiting for a grand explosion of spiritual fireworks or the descent of a fleet of winged angels in the night? Perhaps we will indeed see these! But in order for us to perceive God’s call to us, we must begin with a prayer like Samuel: speak, Lord, for your servant is listening. We must begin from a posture of eagerness and silence – of leaning up against the keyhole. While God does speak through grand things, he often speaks through small ones. It is the attentive ear of the heart that will hear his voice.

And when we do begin to perceive him, then we must go and see. When he says, “follow me,” it is our very next steps that will carry us into worlds we’ve never heretofore imagined. It is a moment for trust and for courage. Discipleship is serious business – but it is the most joyful and most natural journey in the world for those who return again and again to the call of Jesus. Listen! Come, and see.