

Sunday, January 14, 2018

Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)

1 Samuel 3.1-20; Psalm 139.1-5, 12-17; 1 Corinthians 6.12-20; John 1.43-51

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The season of Epiphany is particularly focused on exploring the ways that Jesus is revealed as the Son of God. Last week we saw this revealed in a very direct way. Where at his baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, and the voice of God proclaimed, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mk 1.11). You can’t get a much more obvious revelation than that. Today we move to a far less dramatic revelation. And to a far more personal one. Today’s Gospel, and even our Old Testament reading and Psalm, point to the fact that God – and Jesus as the Son of God – is indeed revealed to us. But even more so, that God through Christ seeks us out and calls us into relationship.

This is pretty clear in all our readings for today. In our reading from 1 Samuel, God comes to Samuel no less than four times, seeking him. In Psalm 139, the Psalmist opens with the words “You have searched me out and known me.” And in the Gospel, Jesus bids Philip, “Follow me,” and Philip, in turn, moved by his personal experience of Jesus – and perhaps prompted by the Spirit – invites Nathanael into relationship with Jesus.

And then there’s our Epistle reading from 1 Corinthians. If we are able to wade through all the rhetoric about sex – a metaphor for the most intimate of human relationship – we see that Paul is really talking about the depth to which Christ seeks to be in relationship with us. In a way that is so intimate that through him, “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6.19). That what God seeks is not just relationship with us as friends, but as a means of dwelling within us. Of being completely connected to us and with us.

Of course, the Old Testament talks about God seeking us, while the New Testament talks about Jesus seeking us. But for all intents and purposes it’s all the same. It’s just that in the New Testament, God is seeking to be in relationship with us through Jesus Christ, his Son. Jesus Christ, God in the flesh.

And while it is significant that God, that Jesus, seeks us out, desiring to be in relationship with us and to dwell with us and within us, what is critical in today’s readings is response. These readings are about first being open to being called. And then about getting out of our own way, about getting over our own concerns or expectations, and having the strength and courage to respond. We see this most explicitly in 1 Samuel and John’s Gospel, which contain valuable lessons about both being open to receiving God’s call and about responding.

In the reading from 1 Samuel, we hear that God calls three times to Samuel, a young apprentice of the priest Eli. At this point, Samuel does not yet know God in a personal way. He does not realize that it is God calling to him. But Eli recognizes that it is God seeking out Samuel. Eli tells Samuel that he must bid the Lord to speak. That he must signal that he is open to hearing God and to receiving the message God has for him. So when God calls out to him a fourth time, Samuel does bid the Lord. “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam 3.10). In these simple words he signals his complete openness and receptivity.

This is of great importance. We see throughout scripture that God seeks to be in relationship with his people. But so often, the people fail. Why? Because they are not open to hearing what God has to say. They are preoccupied with their own concerns, with wanting to do things their own way. That is the human tendency. When confronted with the presence of God, either in prayer or in a more direct way, we are more likely to want to do the talking. To tell God what needs to be done. We are more likely to bid “Listen, Lord, for your servant is speaking,” than to humble ourselves before God and bid “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

This is the first step in responding to God’s call. To be open to hearing what God has to say. Without question or argument. There will be time for that later. And while I have found that questioning has its place in dealing with God, argument rarely does. At least not in the long run.

Once God has broken through, there is the choice of how to actually respond. Of course, ignoring is an option. Not a good one, but an option nonetheless. What takes more courage – and what ultimately leads to greater fulfillment – is to actually listen to what God has to say. To accept what God has to offer. We see this in what follows in the story of Samuel. What God has to tell Samuel – a warning of judgment against the house of his master Eli – is not easy to hear. Samuel wants to hold back and not tell Eli. But Eli recognizes that God does not always come to us in ways that we would want. God’s message is not always what we want to hear. So he counsels Samuel to convey the message nonetheless. When we receive a message from God, it is our obligation to act on it. And if appropriate, to convey it to others. You don’t let God in if you don’t have any intention of following through.

Of course, Eli already knows what God has said. He had already received a prophecy warning that things will not go well for his family, as punishment for his sons’ wicked acts. What this account portrays is the necessity for obedience to following through. Samuel and Eli are models of those who hear and are obedient to God’s word. Samuel was obedient in conveying the message God had given to him. Even though uncomfortable. And Eli accepted and was obedient, even when he knew that it might not be very positive for him and his family. Eli was open to God’s judgment, no matter how painful to hear.

Samuel went on to be one of the greatest judges and prophets in the history of Israel. It was Samuel who anointed Saul as the first king of Israel. And he anointed King David as successor to Saul. And through his career, Samuel proved to be an invaluable counselor to both kings. As Samuel’s life bears out, when we are faithful to God and proclaim the word he gives us, that word, even if not what we would have desired or asked for, does not fall on deaf ears. That in our obedience, we glorify God and are ourselves blessed.

In our Gospel reading we hear a portion of the calling of the disciples. Jesus has already called Andrew and Peter to follow him. He then calls Philip, saying “follow me.” Recognizing that Jesus is the Messiah, Philip is all excited. “This is the one!” He wants to share the experience with his friend Nathanael. “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph of Nazareth” (Jn 1.45). Nathanael is skeptical. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” (Jn 1.46). He has a particular set of expectations about the Messiah that is getting in the way of believing. Philip does not try to explain it to him. Instead, he invites

Nathanael to “come and see” for himself. And to his credit, Nathanael is open to finding out. Trusting in his friend’s invitation, he is able to set aside his own expectations, his preconceived notions, and allows himself to be open to Jesus. Once he has a personal experience of Jesus, he is pleasantly surprised. Jesus proves to dazzle him by providing insight into who Nathanael is. Jesus proves that he already knows Nathanael better than he knows himself. And Nathanael exclaims, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God” (Jn 1.49).

God seeks us out. He seeks out Samuel. He seeks out the Psalmist. He seeks out Philip and Nathanael. He does it varying ways. Sometimes God comes to us directly, as with Samuel and Philip. Even then, sometimes, like Samuel, we still need a mentor, another who can help us discern that what we are hearing is of God. To teach us how the voice of God sounds in our own life. Sometimes God comes to us indirectly through others, as with Philip inviting Nathanael. The Psalmist, a model for each of us, writes “Lord, you have searched me out and known me.” God searches and knows each and every one of us. No matter how he reaches out to us, we have our part to play. We have to be open and receptive. We have to be open to listening for the voice of God. We have to be open to hearing the word of God, as did Samuel. We have to be open to answering the invitation to “follow me,” as did Philip. We have to be open to “come and see.” To see what God is doing, as did Nathanael.

To come full circle, it all begins with being open to, able to, hear God calling to us. Some of you – many of you – may feel that you have never heard God calling out to you. Directly or through another. I assure you, God is there, searching you out, calling to you. In becoming human, God has expressed his fervent desire to be found, to be known, in the most intimate way possible. God would not have created us as his beloved, would not have come into the world in the flesh, just to be silent. It’s not always easy to hear God calling to us against the background of other noise in its many forms.

We are told that Samuel was called during a time when “the word of the Lord was rare,” when “visions were not widespread” (1 Sam 3.1b). Perhaps we live in such a time as well. Not because God does not make himself known, but because we do not open our ears to hear God’s call. Be that from God directly or in a word spoken through others. Perhaps because we do not open our eyes to see God at work in our own lives. Perhaps because we have some sort of expectation about who God is that gets in our way of being open, to hearing, to seeing.

That’s why we’re here. That’s why the church is here. To provide a place where we can come and open our ears and our eyes, where we can suspend our expectation. To allow the voice of God to be heard and the movement of God to be seen and felt. That’s why you are here. To fulfil your desire to hear God, and to be obedient to living out that word he has spoken just to you.

As we continue our journey through this season of Epiphany, may our ears be open, may our eyes be open may our hearts be open, to the many ways God, through Jesus Christ, seeks us out. May we have the resolve to respond by receiving the unique word he has for us as individuals and as a community. And may we have the courage to live into the fullness of his Word.