

Sunday, January 14, 2024
Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)

1 Samuel 3.1-10; John 1.43-51

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Due to technical issues, only last half of sermon was recorded

“Responding to God’s Call”

A week ago yesterday, we celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany. The word “epiphany” means manifestation or appearance. At the Feast of the Epiphany, we celebrate the manifestation of God in the person of Jesus, and therefore, his appearance to us, in three ways. First is through the recognition of the Christ Child by the Magi, which also represents Christ’s manifestation to the Gentiles. Second is the revealing of Jesus as God’s beloved Son at his baptism in the River Jordan. And third is the first of Jesus’ signs (or miracles) at the wedding feast at Cana. For good measure, and because it is of particular importance, we also celebrate the second of these, the baptism of Jesus, on the Sunday after the Epiphany, which was last Sunday. But we don’t stop there. Through the remainder of the season after the Epiphany, what we refer to as Epiphanytide, we explore other ways in which God is revealed through Jesus. Ways in which Jesus is revealed to us in more subtle and more personal ways.

The Scripture readings for this Sunday, as well as those for next Sunday, focus on how God and Christ reveal themselves to us through “call narratives.” Stories that focus on someone being invited or called into God’s service. Providing a much more personal look at what this time of Epiphany is about. That God in Christ is not just revealed in grand, earth-shattering events, but also on a more intimate, personal scale. Such as when God comes to us directly, personally.

Today, we started off with the story of the call of Samuel; a young boy who has been entrusted into the care of Eli, a priest of Israel. You may recall the backstory, in which Samuel’s mother Hannah was unable to conceive. After fervent prayers to God, she did conceive and bore Samuel. In gratitude, she and her husband Elkanah dedicated him to the Lord’s service as a Nazarite. As Hanna says to Eli when she entrusts the child into his care: “For this child I prayed; and the LORD has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD” (1 Sam 1.27-28). Eli would have then worked with Samuel, teaching him holy things, preparing him to one day take his place as a priest in the tabernacle.

While Hannah offered Samuel into God’s service, what we hear today is effectively God’s acceptance of Samuel as a servant of the Lord. Some time has past since Hannah and Elkanah entrusted their son to Eli. It is thought that at this point Samuel is probably around 12 years old. We hear about how one night, as Samuel is sleeping near the ark of God, the most sacred object in all Judaism, God calls to Samuel. Never having heard God speak, Samuel naturally thinks it must be his mentor Eli calling to him. Which, of course, it is not. So Eli sends Samuel back to bed. This occurs three times. On the third round, Eli realizes what is happening, and so directs Samuel “if he [meaning God] calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.’” Which is precisely what Samuel does when God calls him a fourth time. “Speak, for your servant is listening.” God officially calling Samuel into his service, and Samuel accepting

that call. The form that takes unfolds in the succeeding chapters. Samuel, who would go on to be one of the great priests and prophets in Israel's history, being instrumental in the transition from the period of the judges to the United Kingdom of Israel and Judah under King Saul, and again in the transition to the reign of King David. Who would have even thought that a young boy, in responding "Speak, for your servant is listening," who was willing to accept God's invitation, would go from being a nobody to being a kingmaker and moral advisor to the king? Not once, but twice. When God calls, you never know where you might end up.

This story reveals one other important component of how God calls one into service. In this scene, God is persistent in issuing the call. He calls out to Samuel four times before Samuel finally answers. A true sense of call will not be fleeting, issued only once. A true call from God will be persistent. God recognizes that sometimes we are a little slow on the uptake. Sometimes we need to hear the invitation two, three, four, twenty, fifty, a hundred times before we get the message. God is nothing if not persistent.

To this day, Samuel serves as an example of openness in accepting God's call into his service. In that moment in his youth when God called out to Samuel, Samuel did not question or seek clarification: "okay, before I give you an answer, I need to know exactly what it is that you want me to do." He did not insist on having things his own way or responding with particular demands: "Listen Lord, for your servant is speaking. If I am going to serve you, I want you to assure me of X, Y, and Z." No, Samuel's response was an unqualified, "Speak, for your servant is listening." In other words, "tell me what you want me to do and I will do it." With an implied, "no ifs, ands, or buts." Demonstrating that responding to God's call is an act of faith, trusting that if God has called us, we need have no reservations about responding unconditionally.

This is certainly the understanding, the example, that those of us called to ordained ministry operated under when we heard God call us. That if we were going to accept, it is unconditionally. And I would argue that the same applies to all who hear an authentic call to any form of ministry, be it to holy orders, or as a layperson called to any ministry in the parish or the community. If God calls, it is undoubtedly because God recognizes you have what is needed for whatever you are being invited into. That God need you and your talents for this particular task or ministry.

Our Gospel reading for today contains another call narrative. Actually two. The first is Jesus calling Philip to be one of his disciples. Philip immediately chooses to follow Jesus. Philip's call story has parallels to that of Samuel: an unqualified "yes" in response. Presumably some time then passes (we don't know how long), when Philip runs into his friend Nathanael. We can only assume he is having a positive experience of following Jesus, and wants his friend to experience that, as well. So he invites Nathanael: "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael's initial response is "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" In other words, he was a little skeptical, a little unsure, but did at least seem to be open to exploration. He needed a little more to go on before he was willing to give a definitive answer. While not how Samuel or Philip responded, that's okay too. Some people are more cautious and need more to go on. But at least he did not immediately shut Philip down. He did not immediately reject the invitation but continued to be open.

Rather than argue with or try to convince Nathanael with words, Philip merely responds with "Come and see." Sometimes, a little first-hand experience is called for. Philip takes Nathanael to meet Jesus and Nathanael has a chance to experience for himself just who this Jesus is. What he is capable of. To have his questions answered. Nothing wrong with that. Nothing wrong with doing due diligence and making sure you are making an informed decision. And finally, Nathanael is satisfied. At least, we assume he is. The story does not end with Nathanael saying "yes," but we know from other passages of scripture that he did become one of Jesus' disciples.

Both the Old Testament and Gospel readings for today are about discerning God's call to serving him. About being open to hearing God's invitation, be it from the source directly, as in the case of Samuel and Philip, or be it through those close to us, as in the case of Nathanael. Regardless of the medium, the ultimate source is the same. God seeing something that he needs to continue the work of building his kingdom and inviting us into that divine project.

The call narratives we heard today, about Samuel, about Philip, and about Nathanael, demonstrate the broad range of how people respond to God's call. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. We each need to be true to who we are and respond in our own way and in our own time. Philip's response was immediate. Samuel took a little more time because he was unsure as to what was going on. And Nathanael just needed a little more to go, needed to actually experience it before being willing to commit. Or, as in my case, I am fond of saying I argued with God for 20 years before I finally accepted God's call. I could have saved myself and God a lot of hassle if I had been a little more like Samuel, or even Nathanael.

The bottom line is that the way we are called into God's service is going to be as unique as we are. God meets us where we are in our own lives. He came to Samuel in the middle of the night in the tabernacle. Jesus ran into Philip on the road. God worked through Philip to invite Nathanael. The one thing we can be assured of is that in a true call, God will be persistent. As he was with Samuel, as he was with Nathanael. And of course, we all are different in what we need before we are able to respond. Some are able to respond immediately, seeing in their heart-of-hearts that this is indeed a call from God, as did Samuel, as did Philip. And some need a little time. Some need more information, as did Nathanael. Regardless, all ultimately made unqualified responses in the affirmative. All are valid calls, all are valid responses.

The one thing that is certain: as Christians, as members of the Body of Christ, there are no bystanders. There are no pew-warmers. God calls each of us into his service in some form or fashion. We need to be open to hearing the invitation when it is issued. When we do hear that invitation, be it from God directly or through another, we need to be prepared to carefully and prayerfully consider our response. Knowing, trusting, that like Samuel, like Philip, and like Nathanael, when we do accept, our lives will be forever changed.