

1.14.2024 Epiphany 2

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1 Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

“Follow me”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Jesus’ words to Philip, “*Follow me,*” come at a good moment as we begin a New Year encouraging us to ask, “Who will be the guide of my life not only this year but over my lifetime? Over the course of our lifetimes those we look to for guidance in day-to-day matters – civic officials, elected leaders, and social pundits – will change again and again, but who can we consistently look to for guidance throughout our lives?”

In today’s first reading, we encounter a boy named Samuel who was serving the Lord under Eli in the temple. Samuel heard the Lord’s voice calling him three times during the night but did not know it was the Lord. Thinking it was Eli, Samuel ran to him, saying, “*Here I am, for you called for me.*” After receiving Eli’s help, the Lord called Samuel a fourth time, and Samuel said, “*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.*”

This story has long captured my imagination because it is easily imaginable and real. Who has not been woken at night by a voice in a dream or some very real worry or problem? In my own experience, such night moments are times to place my concerns before God in prayer. Perhaps you have done the same and awoken in the morning with a renewed sense of vision and even determination about the issue you have been facing.

The story of Samuel remains fresh today because it’s an example of a young person learning to discern God’s voice. What is particularly remarkable in this story is that God spoke openly with Samuel about the very real adult misdeeds of Eli’s sons, telling of judgement for the house of Eli (1 Sam. 2:12-17, 22-36). Eli’s sons had misused their leadership roles to profit from their work. They took the best cuts of meat intended for sacrifice and they had sexual relations with the women who served in the temple. Their father Eli was unable to restrain them.

Samuel reported the Lord’s words to Eli withholding nothing and Eli said, “*It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.*” Eli knew his sons had misused their positions of leadership for personal gain and turned the matter over to God.

At the start of a New Year, this story causes me to ask how might we use our lives and the gifts we have been given, not self-centeredly, but in service to God and our neighbor? Some might say, “Pastor, these episodes happened so long ago, if they happened at all – what bearing do they have

on contemporary life today?” My response would be, “Have profiting from one’s position of authority disappeared from contemporary life?” Is not the misuse of one’s power also a sin against the God who has given to each of us gifts to use in daily life? Are we not meant to use our lives in service to others rather than for our own personal gain?

Jesus’ words to Philip are therefore important. “*Follow me*” is an invitation to walk with Jesus over a lifetime, perhaps beginning when we are young like Samuel. The question of listening to God becomes more difficult as we get older, and life’s problems more complicated and final. Following Jesus is not a means for my own glory; rather, following Jesus is the way of the cross and service to others. It has always been so.

The greater questions that these texts pose to us are: Where does my moral compass come from? How does a sense of ethical direction help guide my life? As we all know, there are a great many things in life that are not illegal, but which are ethically wrong. In the case of Eli’s sons, even the Mosaic law could not teach and restrain them. How are we to discern our way in the world amid its complex problems and challenges?

On any given morning, we might get some sideways glances if we came into the kitchen announcing, “The Lord spoke to me in the night!” And yet we can awake after prayer with God at night, confident of the way forward. These ancient texts continue to encourage us today to speak like Samuel, saying, “*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.*” These ancient texts remind us God’s prophetic voice continues to speak to us and through us.

Philip’s response to Jesus’ words, “*Follow me,*” are both spectacular and prophetic. Philip went to his friend Nathanael, saying, “*We have found him about whom Moses in the Law and also in the Prophets wrote, Jesus Son of Joseph from Nazareth.*” Philip’s confession about Jesus, however, brought mockery from Nathanael, “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*” Nathanael’s bias against Jesus was based solely upon his small-town upbringing. Nathanael clearly thought that the Savior should have been raised in a big city. It’s funny how we can judge people by where they come from rather than by what they do and speak.

Philip’s response to Nathanael was again spectacular and prophetic. He said to Nathanael, “*Come and see.*” This might be the best invitation line ever to invite someone to church. “*Come and see*” – Come and experience Jesus for yourself.”

Like each of us, Nathanael came to meet Jesus, not realizing that Jesus had already searched him out, saying, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is not deceit.” Surprised, Nathanael

asked, “Have we met before? Where did you get to know me?” Jesus’ answer, “*I saw you under the fig tree,*” is a turn of phrase suggesting that Jesus saw Nathanael studying the Torah under the fig tree. Nathanael, unlike Eli’s sons who did many other things with their time except studying the Torah, was called “*an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.*”

Based upon Nathanael’s perceived moral compass Jesus sized Nathanael up quickly as someone who was honest rather than deceitful. Sensing he was in the presence of the divine, Nathanael exclaimed, “*You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!*” Jesus had searched out Nathanael’s innermost being and he knew it.

Psalm 139 appointed for today reads, “*O Lord, you have searched me and known me...Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.*” Jesus knew Philip and Nathanael, just as the Lord knew Samuel. God searches and knows our hearts and minds from whence come our words and deeds.

The words Jesus spoke to Nathanael, “*You will see greater things than these,*” mean that in following Jesus, we will also glimpse heaven. Jesus calls us to follow him, because it is in following that God searches and leads us, offering glimpses of heaven over our lifetimes. In saying, “*Speak, for your servant is listening,*” we receive answers to prayer, and we never walk alone.

The modern world is, of course, different than the world of Samuel and Nathanael, yet human beings remain the same. The world is still in need of glimpses of heaven. The world is still in need of women and men who say, “*Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.*”

In your nighttime moments when you feel God searching you out, may your prayer be:

O Lord, my heart is open and listening. Speak, for your servant is listening, and I will follow you all the days of my life. Amen.