

Come and See

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth... Come and see."

Whenever the reading from the First Book of Samuel crops up in the Sunday lectionary readings - the reading about the call of Samuel - invariably I am reminded of my first year at Virginia Theological Seminary. I don't know whether they are still doing it or not, but in my day, at the beginning of January, the week before the term officially began, first year students were required to attend what was euphemistically referred to as "Read and Bleed Week", or to give it its official title: Oral interpretation of Scripture. For four days, we were drilled on how to read the Bible out loud by three faculty from Catholic University, especially brought in for the task - a Roman Catholic priest, and two teachers from the theatre department. Over four intensive days we were instructed on how to proclaim and understand scripture in a liturgical setting. The drama teachers helped those who needed it how to project and read the scriptures with meaning. The priest selected passages from Scripture known for their difficulty, and taught us how to interpret what it was we were proclaiming. For those of us who had been reading out loud most of our lives and already had a good solid understanding of scripture, it was quite a fun week. For those who hadn't, the title "Read and Bleed Week" was fulfilled in more than one sense of the term. All to say, the calling of Samuel, the Old Testament lesson for this Sunday, was one of the texts we had to read.

It is an iconic passage. The young boy Samuel, who has been dedicated to God in gratitude by his mother Hanna, is serving the priest Eli at the sacred shrine of Shilo. In historical terms, this is long before King David would choose a small village named Jerusalem to be his religious and military centre; long before Solomon would build the Temple there. It is night, and Eli is asleep in his room and Samuel in the Temple. Deep in the night Samuel hears a voice call his name, and thinking it is Eli who called him, goes to him, only to find it was not so. Three times this happens, and after the third time Eli understands it is God who is calling Samuel, and tells him the next time God calls Samuel by name to answer: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Scholars estimate that Samuel was about twelve years old when he heard the voice of God, and the Hebrew Scriptures make a point of telling us, the reader, that Samuel "did not yet know the Lord." Quite often in the Hebrew Scriptures God makes God's self known without the recipient at first realising it; it is Eli who tells Samuel it is God who is calling. Samuel also illustrates that God's call is not dependent on age or experience or a previous relationship with God. The Divine call always comes through God's initiative, as Jesus would later tell his disciples in the Gospel of John, "You did not choose me but I chose you" (Jn. 15:16). The irony was not lost on us seminarians on "Read and Bleed" week that although felt called by God, it was the "Eli's" in the church who had affirmed the call.

In the lesson from the Gospel of John we have moved on a few centuries, but the themes are still the same - God's call to the un-initiated. We pick up the story where the brothers Simon Peter and Andrew have already made the decision to follow Jesus. Travelling on to Galilee, Jesus comes across Philip and invites him to "Follow me." Without a "by your leave" Philip then seeks out Nathanael to tell him about Jesus of Nazareth. Now we know little else about Nathanael. He crops up again at the end of the Gospel of John, when after the resurrection Jesus appears to the disciples by the sea of Galilee. Nathanael is often times identified with the Apostle Bartholomew, but that identity is not really based on any firm biblical evidence. But then, as is often the case, this is not the point of the story.

The point is that Philip tells Nathanael he has found the one spoken of by Moses and the Prophets - Jesus of Nazareth. Nathanael is skeptical. Nazareth is an insignificant village, hardly the place from which the Messiah would emerge. Nathanael exclaims: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" To which Philip responds in words that have carried down the centuries, "Come and see." In other words, don't let your biases get in the way of seeing something that might change you - step out of your bubble and come and see. As Nathanael approaches Jesus he discovers something that would unsettle anyone, Jesus already knows him - not as a person might know another, just by acquaintance, but really knows him - deep inside knows him as Psalm 139 tells us that God knows us: *Lord, you have searched me out and known me...* That's the kind of unsettling knowing some might say God could use against us. But not so Jesus. Jesus knows Nathanael as a man who, for all his skepticism, in which "there is no deceit," no dishonesty, no guile. And like two people looking deep into each other's eyes, Nathanael sees Jesus for who he really is, not just some wandering, itinerant prophet from an insignificant, no good village in Israel, but the Son of God - the one who would show humanity what God was like, and restore us to the image God made us at creation.

We are in the season of Epiphany, the season of God in Christ being made manifest in and through and around us, in such a way as it has the power to transform us, compel us to see life through a different lens. As I shared in my sermon on Christmas Eve, if Christmas is about "knowing and loving," then the season of Epiphany is about revealing and following: revealing the Christ-child that has come among us, and revealing the Christ-child within each of us. There is, therefore, that which God in Christ does, and that in Christ in which we are called to answer: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

In time, Samuel would become the great leader of the emerging People of Israel, constantly challenging them to see God in ways they were not always willing to see. We know little else of Nathanael, but we can guess from the gospel story what was in stall for him as a follower of Jesus. When God reveals, God acts; to that which God in Christ does we are invited, in the words of Philip to Nathanael, to "Come and See." Come and see what God is doing in our lives and respond. Amen