

The God Who Calls
I Samuel 3.1-10, John 1.43-51
Sunday, January 14, 2018
Epiphany 2B
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St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Philip had an experience he couldn't explain. He met a man who was a teacher. Well, he was more than a teacher, he was a faith leader. He was a poet. A Prophet. A seer, of sorts. He saw things as they really were and as they could be. He saw people that way. Do you know how powerful it is to be seen? He explained things in a way and in a light that made everything make sense even if it what he was teaching wasn't sensible. It was like the lights came on and what was most essential and most important was now suddenly clear. And everything else just faded off to the sides either to be ignored or resisted or reformed. People pay big money for that kind of clarity and never seem to find it. This guy didn't just talk about making the world a better place, he was doing it all day long every day. And he looked at Philip and invited him to come be part of the journey. Of course, Philip jumped at the chance and didn't think twice before he was giving his life to this way of seeing and turning the lights on and sweeping away the non-essentials.

He was absolutely going to join the movement and would ultimately give his life to this way. But he couldn't go without talking to Nathanael, and he invited him to come along, too. Think about it. You meet a teacher, leader, poet, prophet, seer who somehow makes sense of your life in a way you've never managed to. This person sees you fully as you are and draws out what is best in you. You like who you are when he's around. There's something about him that makes you hope and believe in the goodness of people and the potential for the world. He inspires you to *do* something with your life and with your neighbors and for the people in your path who suffer. He seems to have tools and resources and ways of the suffering stop. You have seen it happen and you believe him when he says he can teach you how to do it, too.

Imagine you are in this hopeful, believing, trusting place and ready to walk away from your old life into a new one. You're not going to vanish, you're going to tell some folks. You're especially going to tell your closest friends. And if you really have discovered someone who unlocks this kind of truth for you, chances are you're going to invite them to join you. And so it is that Philip finds Nathanael and says, "This is what we've been waiting for. This is what we've talked about. I've found this man, this teacher, this seer. He's like part prophet, part poet, part healer. He understands me and makes me

the best version of myself. I want to follow him and learn from him. I want you to come with me. You're going to love him. He's from Chalmette."

Nathanael rolls his eyes and turns his nose up immediately. "You're this worked up over somebody from where? The very best thing that ever happened to you in your entire life happened in Kenner? The great awakening that turned everything around and makes you want to change the world started in Houma?" But Philip ignores Nathanael's bias and arrogance altogether. He expected as much coming from Nathanael who was a snob about most things, at best. "Nathanael, just come and see. That's all I'm asking. Just meet him and listen and feel what it's like to be in his presence. He's accessed God in a way you and I have only ever heard about. He's got his finger on Truth, and I know you're going to feel it the way I have. Just come and see."

Nathanael listens to his friend and does go to meet Jesus, and it's a wild encounter. Jesus sees him before they even arrive. This seeing, poet, prophet, teacher sees Nathanael while he is still far off, knows exactly who he is, sees him for his earnest faithfulness, his striving perfectionism, his fear and doubt. Jesus sees him, calls him, and welcomes him all in one, elegant swoop. And Nathanael is almost immediately drawn into the Jesus way.

That's about all we know about Nathanael, in fact. Some call him Bartholomew and connect him to the list of disciples that way. After Jesus' crucifixion, Nathanael and the others are the ones who return to fishing, already going back to what they've known instead of continuing the work and way of Jesus. And it's in that story that Jesus calls to them again, invites them over again, feeds them again, and commissions them again. Always seeing, inviting, and sending.

It's a funny twist of time that this one who is reluctant to even go meet Jesus in the first place because he was from Nazareth is one who may or may not be the one called by a different name and only gets mentioned one more time. Maybe he regretted his prejudice immediately and never looked back. What we know for sure is that Jesus saw, knew, and called, and Nathanael was drawn further into the great dance of God because of this calling.

There's a connective thread between today's I Samuel text and this story from John's gospel. Yes, there's the obvious one of the ways God calls and invites and waits us out. But perhaps more interesting to me is the theme of one who is supposed to know how God works but doesn't initially recognize what is happening. Nathanael is a devout man of God, devoted to his faith expression. And yet his imagination is completely stifled, and he simply cannot grasp that God moves in very ordinary, unexpected ways

and places. Eli figures out what is going on, but initially he can't imagine that God would speak to a child rather than to him. As it turns out, God hasn't been able to get Eli's full attention for some time and works through the more open-hearted of the two of them. I find tremendous hope in this storyline. There are all kinds of fixed, set, established ways that we expect God to move. Then we human folks become so fixated on those set, established ways that we preserve them and protect them until they're so airtight there's no room for mystery and dance and holy breath. Oh, we know this story.

Sometimes the people who have been studying God's word the longest are the ones who get the most wrong. We become accustomed to our structures and habits. We normalize our preferences and biases. And then we call all of that sacred and put God's name on it when really God is whispering to us in the dark, calling the ones we think cannot be called, inviting new co-conspirators in hopeful children and uptight fishermen because the rest of us shut off our imaginations and turned down our hearing a long time ago. God doesn't get lost in habit and routine. God doesn't give preference to "the way we've always done it." God doesn't get worked up about the rightness of structure but is present in the essence of the encounter. We know this. The most beautiful, perfectly orchestrated worship experience can fall completely flat. The most casual, imperfect, backyard gathering of friends and neighbors can draw people into conversations and relationship of transformation and truth. God is always welcoming co-conspirators. The right people for God's work are the ones with curiosity and open-heartedness, the ones who can hear the call and respond with their lives.

The next two weeks we'll talk about calling. How do we get swept into the story of God? How do we put language and way around spirituality and practice? Next week is the more traditional calling of disciples. Jesus sees the men fishing, approaches them, invites them, and they drop their nets to follow him. But today's texts have this interesting layer of relationship. It's Jesus, a friend, and the one being called. In the case of Nathanael, the one being called is the one who is so rooted in his particular faith expression and cultural tradition that he cannot imagine God moves beyond what he knows. But his friend Philip invites him to expand. With Samuel, the experience is altogether new. He's been serving at the temple but has never heard a voice, never had some mysterious, holy encounter with the divine presence in the dark of the night. And though his friend takes a few times to wake up, it is the friend Eli who makes the connection and introduction for young Samuel.

In a lovely telling of this story for children, Carolyn Brown notes, "Friends can also help friends know God better. Eli taught Samuel what to say when God called. Samuel told Eli what God had told him, even though he knew Eli would not like it. Philip got

Nathanael to listen to Jesus even though Nathanael did not believe anyone from Nazareth would have anything important to say...[And] each person has the potential to be such a friend to others.”¹

She’s right, in fact. I see this in you here all the time. You expand my understanding of who God is and how God moves. You wake me up to truth in a way I hadn’t quite known it before. You shake off the cobwebs of my imagination and invite me to come and see new divine realities and possibilities for myself.

I think of the first New Orleans Volunteer Orchestra performance I attended, and the first that was held right here in this place. We’d all fallen so completely in love with Joseph Cieslak as a Loyola undergrad, so it was easy to say “yes” to welcoming this volunteer collaboration. He had a vision for orchestra and choir together singing *Bohemian Rhapsody* right here in this space. And in the days leading up to that performance, he faced tremendous, unexpected loss. He returned to New Orleans, walked into this room, stood in front of the orchestra and choir he gathered from around this city, and in the midst of deep pain, he led a magical, beautiful night of music that rattled the windows and drew us all more closely to the beauty and mystery and humor and presence of something holy.

It was Tim Lauve-Moon who first told me about The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond and their work toward Undoing Racism. No one here thinks racism is a good thing. We’d all agree we need to undo racism. But his language around this work was so unselfconscious. So open and evolving. He participated in a cohort at Trinity Episcopal Church and came back to me with a book, handouts, and notes. He had fire and passion in his belly and wanted me to come and see for myself. I thought of myself as a pretty aware person already and certainly not a racist. Tim’s “come and see” led to five of us joining the September 2017 cohort of Undoing Racism, and again my heart and mind have expanded and opened as I have discovered new layers and levels of justice work to do out in the world and deep within myself.

On Wednesday night this past week, we talked about our Mission Action emphasis on criminal justice, and Becky Meriwether stood up and help a legal pad sheet of paper with lists of projects and concerns and policy efforts that our criminal justice team has taken on over the last 18-24 months. She then invited others to share their personal stories about this effort, and my heart and mind expanded and opened again as Elizabeth Wilson took the floor and shared about her training and growing advocacy work in the court system, watching and bearing witness to injustice, advocating for

¹ <http://worshippingwithchildren.blogspot.com/2011/12/year-b-2nd-sunday-after-epiphany-2nd.html>

fairness, being present to and fully seeing those who are presently incarcerated. I am amazed. You, my friends, are inviting me to know God better.

We got so off track in the church with the way we came to describe evangelism. "Do you know that you know that you know" something about heaven. Something about afterlife. Something apart from what's happening right here. But the story of calling in scripture is not about any of that. The story of calling in scripture is about this life right here right now. The story of calling in scripture is about waking up to fully live, fully embody, fully show up for your own life, for your friends, for your neighbors, for strangers, for God. The story of calling in scripture is friends telling their story to another friend over a meal. As one of you said recently, we need more time with feet under the table. We need to share meals that linger and invite conversation and make space for telling stories. When you share your story with me, you invite me to know God better. When I witness you live your life with fire and fullness, my imagination expands and my capacity to follow on the way of Jesus grows. The God who calls and sends is also the God who draws us together to live this thing out on a shared journey. And I am so grateful, my friends, to bear witness to the ways God is calling you today.

Amen.