

Second Weekend After Epiphany (B/RCL): "Come and See"

1 Samuel 3:1-10 [11-20] and John 1:43-51

January 13-14, 2018

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

'Know how a line from a song can stay in your head all week? Last weekend we sang "Come to the Water," and the line that's been replaying in my head is:

"Why spend your life except for the Lord?"

Why invest our earthly life in something that's not linked to eternity? Why fritter away our lives in stuff that won't outlive us?

You may say, "Sure, that makes sense for **you**; you're a pastor!" But this weekend's lessons tell me that God is calling **all** God's children by name, inviting each one, "Follow Me," "Come and see." Even the **unlikeliest** candidates, among whom you might count yourself.

In the lesson from First Samuel we find the boy Samuel serving in the temple at Shiloh. He was a miracle child, born to Hannah, a mother who had almost given up hope of conceiving. In her joy at God's gift of a son, she dedicated him back to the Lord, pledging him for lifelong service in the sanctuary, taking him to Shiloh as soon as he was weaned, leaving him in the care of the priest Eli, to be raised up to serve the Lord. In today's reading we find him sleeping in the temple, awakened repeatedly by Someone calling his name: "Samuel, Samuel!"

There's one other person in the building, the priest Eli, so Samuel assumes Eli is the one summoning him. (When **we** hear **our** name called, we look around to see who's there – we don't look up because we assume it's the Lord!) Three times he sleepily, obediently pads off to Eli in his Dr. Denton's and bunny slippers: "Here I am, for you called me" (1 Samuel 3:5, 6, 8). The first 2 times groggy Eli tells him to go back to bed. After all, why would Samuel assume that the Lord is calling **Samuel**? He's only a kid, for Pete's sake! And if God has a message to deliver, wouldn't God give it to **him**, the adult, the Grand Poobah, Eli, the seasoned priest, the mature man of faith? The 3rd time is the charm, though: Eli, despite the fact that both his vision and his insight are poor, finally realizes it must be God calling the child. He

gives Samuel a line to recite, and the next time Samuel hears his name called, he answers, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” (1 Samuel 3:10) Hence the line we sing in the hymn we love and will sing today:

“Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night....”
(Here I Am, Lord, ELW 574)

God calls the unlikely. God calls you, too.

The boy Samuel will grow up to be the prophet who anoints David king, another dark horse, another unlikely candidate. God told Samuel to go to Jesse and discern which of Jesse’s sons would be the next king of Israel. (Saul was the current king and not performing too well.) Jesse troops all his older, tall and handsome sons before the prophet but Samuel passes over each one. Finally Jesse says, “But it’s **got** to be one of them.” And Samuel asks, “Aren’t there any more?” And Jesse replies, “Just the little guy tending the sheep....” Samuel tells Jesse to send for David, the Lord lets him know he’s the one, and Samuel anoints him for a future day when he’ll become king. Humble beginnings. Unlikely candidate. Full of character flaws. But, unexplicably, this shepherd boy became a man after God’s own heart.

There’s more **calling**, seeking, **finding**, going on in the Gospel. You’ve probably seen the bumper sticker, “Have you found Jesus?” A tongue-in-cheek response is, “I didn’t know He was lost.” In this Gospel, it’s **Jesus** doing the finding. He finds Philip and simply says, “Follow Me.” (John 1:43) In turn, Philip finds his friend Nathanael and tells him, “We’ve **found** the Messiah! Jesus of Nazareth!” Nathanael’s response is really snarky: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:45) We don’t really know **why** Nathaniel thought Nazareth was the armpit of Israel. Maybe it’s like someone saying, “I’m from Secaucus,” and us thinking, “Bummer of a birthplace,” because it used to smell so bad. It’s not just Secaucus that gets a bad rap. I lived out-of-state for years and came to **expect** people to give me a look of sympathy when I said I was from New Jersey. All most Midwesterners know about our Garden State is the NJ Turnpike or as much of Newark as you can see landing at the airport on your way someplace else.

We learn later in the Fourth Gospel that Nathaniel was from Cana in Galilee, located not too far from Nazareth. Maybe his bad attitude toward it was a matter of the rivalry felt between near neighbors,

like Manasquan and Wall, or an example of the saying, “Familiarity breeds contempt.” At any rate, Jesus’ hometown alone was enough reason for Nathaniel to take Him out of the running as God’s promised Messiah.

“Can anything good come from Nazareth??” Think of the news the last couple days about the reaction of people in Africa, Haiti, El Salvador, to their nations being described in crude and derogatory terms. They’re shocked and angry at the insult. People are **at least** going to become **defensive** (if not worse) when their hometown, home state, home country are disparaged.

Now we’re not thinking Philip himself was from Nazareth. But in his shoes, I might’ve been miffed that I’m sharing the news of a lifetime with Nathaniel and he’s dismissing it out of hand because of some petty prejudice. I might’ve said: “Suit yourself.” Philip was patient, though. He gave a wise and caring response: **“Come and see.”**

Earlier in chapter 1 of this Fourth Gospel, **Jesus had said just that** to Andrew and his friend. They were disciples of John who had seen him point to Jesus and say, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” (John 1:36) They were curious and followed Jesus, who realized He was being stalked, turned around and asked them:

*“What are you looking for?” They [answer sideways by saying,]
“Rabbi..., where are you staying?” He said to them, **“Come and see.”**
(John 1:38-39)*

There’s nothing like experiencing something for ourselves, right? We may try to describe the beauty of a favorite place to someone else, but no matter how eloquent we are, or how well we think we’ve captured the place in photos, deep down we know **you have to be there** to appreciate it, right? I can tell you how the sun shines through the stained glass of Notre Dame Cathedral and casts the colors onto the stone floor like shattered jewels, but I know that description limps. You’ve described to me places near and dear to your hearts, and I know I’d have to visit them to appreciate fully what you’re telling me. The best thing we can say to each other is, **“Come and see!”**

I know some people wonder, “What would possess **anyone** to get up early enough to worship at 7 a.m. on a Wednesday?” Any of our “regulars” could tell you about the intimacy of gathering around the altar, the precious silence after we receive Holy Communion, standing together, each one praying in his or her own heart, the warmth of sharing “coffee and” with friends afterwards in the kitchen, the centering power of 20 minutes of worship and 5 or 10 or 20 minutes of food fellowship afterwards. But the best thing we can say to the skeptical is “Come and see!” Don’t take my word for it. See for yourself. Decide for yourself.

So what moves Nathanael **so fast** from his initial skepticism and snarkiness to his great expression of faith?

“Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”
(John 1:49)

Well, Jesus sees him and compliments him, saying he’s a true-blue person of faith. But he’s a tough sell and I still hear some cynicism in Nathanael’s response:

*“Where did **you** get to know **me**?”*
(John 1:48)

‘Remember Jesus’ response?

“I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”
(John 1:38)

That “up close and personal” knowledge touched this tough guy’s heart. Jesus has “up close and personal knowledge” of each of us, too. ‘Haven’t heard Him share it? “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

The Lord says, “Follow me” to every one of us, not just pastors. Last week I mentioned the book *The Finest Hours* about the Coast Guardsmen who saved crew members of a tanker that split in half during a blizzard off of Cape Cod back in the 50’s. Bernie Webber was the pilot of the boat that did the saving. He was the son of a minister; his father desperately wanted him to follow in his footsteps and go into the ministry. The deacons of his church even collected enough money to send him off to a Bible college – from which he bailed, after a semester or two. On the night he was called on to risk his life to save others:

Bernie Webber had an epiphany. He believed that Providence had placed him in this time and in this place. He thought... back to the thousands of sermons he had heard his father give while he was growing up. They had all been preparing him for this. He pictured the disappointment in his father's eyes when he had turned his back on the ministry as an aimless youth. Reverend Webber had wanted his son to serve God. Bernie believed that he was serving God on this stormy night. Webber later recalled the feeling. "You receive the strength and the courage, and you know what your duty is. You realize that you have to attempt a rescue. It's born in you; it's part of your job."¹

Ultimately **it's only the Holy Spirit** who can change hearts and heal hurts and rearrange priorities and bring holy order out of chaos – **or** bring creative chaos out of unholy and life-leaching order. But, for whatever reason, **the Lord chooses to use us** as the Spirit's spokespersons and as inviters to the Table. May we listen closely to our Lord calling us by name, inviting "Come and see," "Follow me." Then may we come, follow, and bring others along with us. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

¹ Michael J. Tougias and Casey Sherman. *The Finest Hours: The True Story of the U.S. Coast Guard's Most Daring Sea Rescue*. (NY: Scribner, 2009), p. 49.