

Epiphany 2B 2012

Texts: 1 Samuel 3:1-20

Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

John 1:43-51

“Speak, for your servant is listening.” 1 Samuel 3:10

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

It isn't every Sunday that the themes of the four readings seem so connected and interwoven as they are today. The lectionary scholars did try to shape the combination of readings for a particular Sunday based on themes, and on some Sundays they are more successful than others. This Sunday is one such example.

In our Old Testament reading from the first book of Samuel, we have a call narrative. Samuel, promised to God by his mother Hannah, is under the tutelage of Eli, the priest of the temple. Samuel is sleeping in the temple tending the ark of God. He hears his name being called and each time he hears it, he goes into Eli's room thinking it was Eli who had called him. It isn't until the 3rd time he goes into Eli that Eli realizes that it is God who has called Samuel and he advises Samuel to say, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

In the New Testament reading from John we have the story of the calling of Nathanael. Jesus decides to go to Galilee. He finds Philip and tells him, “Follow me.” Philip then goes to Nathanael and tells him that the Messiah has been found and that it is Jesus of Nazareth. Nathanael is a bit incredulous at this news. To paraphrase his response, “Really Philip? Come on now. We both know that nothing good has ever come out of Nazareth.”

Jesus sees Nathanael approaching and he knows Nathanael is an honest and upright man. He calls Nathanael by his name and Nathanael is amazed that Jesus knew who he was. He asks Jesus, “Where did you come to know me?” Jesus tells him he saw him sitting under a fig tree before Philip called him. Jesus knew Nathanael before Philip or Nathanael knew Jesus.

Today's Psalm, Psalm 139, is one of my favorites. It starts out with the words, "Lord, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar." The Psalmist continues, "I will thank you for I am wonderfully made; your works are wonderful and I know it well."

And before we think that our epistle reading from First Corinthians is not related to these call narratives, that it is out in left field somewhere, it too, is related. The epistle reading talks about how our bodies are not our own to do with what we please, but are an extension of Christ. Paul reminds us that God calls all of us, our bodies as well as our souls to glorify him. Our identity is literally in Christ.

We come to God as a package deal. The one who knew us before we were formed in the womb, the one who created not only the stars in the heavens and dirt of the earth, but who knit together each and every one of us, calls each and every one of us.

God calls each one of us, but understanding that it is God, let alone what the message is, can be very difficult. Even Eli, a faithful and devoted priest of the temple, didn't get that it was God calling Samuel until the third time Samuel showed up in his bedroom. When it was acknowledged that the one calling Samuel was God, God could finally speak his message to Samuel.

And what was God's message, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears tingle." God was about to do a new thing. It was going to be a hard thing, but it would open the door to a new and renewed Israel. There would be new life.

There are several elements to the story of Eli and Samuel that I want to focus on. The first is that Samuel needed help discerning that it was God speaking to him. We are told, "the word of God was rare in those days" (v. 1). Samuel was young, inexperienced in the ways of God, and he needed someone to help him put his experience in perspective. Samuel needed someone that could listen and discern with him.

Discerning God's call on our lives is never an individual process. It is something so important that the Church has always advised, and in

some cases insisted, that we walk that road with another. Because it is so easy to confuse God's voice or urging with something or someone else's, the counsel and prayers of another person is imperative.

There are people especially trained in this area and they are called Spiritual Directors. The name is kind of a misnomer in that they don't direct anything, but they are companions on the way. They are skilled at looking for the signs of God's movement in an individual's life. They walk beside someone and, in my experience at least, ask far more questions than they give answers.

I was blessed to have a director in seminary that had a loving, yet laser like, focus. She asked me questions that seven years later, I am still gnawing on. She took me deeper than I could have gone myself, and she helped open up my ears so that I could hear God more clearly.

Eli was Samuel's spiritual director. He wrestled with Samuel's being called along side Samuel, and was able to point Samuel in a direction he hadn't considered. He was able to read the signs and perceive what might be happening.

Another element in this story is that Samuel not only had to decide to listen, he had to submit; Samuel had to decide to obey God. Eli was a wonderful role model for Samuel in this way as well.

God's message was not an easy one. In fact, it was downright painful. Eli's priesthood would come to an end. His sons had defiled the temple by sleeping with the women caring for it and they had taken money from the treasury for their own benefit. Eli had rebuked them, strongly, but he didn't take the next step and remove them. After he admonished them he kind of turned a blind eye to what they were doing. As a result, he would be removed.

Samuel didn't want to share this message with Eli, but Eli told him to tell him the unvarnished truth and he did. Eli accepted God's judgment. It must have been excruciating to hear that his house would be punished. But Eli recognized the truth of what God had said and done and he submitted to it. Eli showed Samuel what a faithful response looked like, even when it was personally hard and painful to do so.

Although our two call narratives in today's readings are to individuals, God's call is not just to individuals, but also to communities.

There are times when communities will enter times of discernment and prayer to make sure they are on the road God has called them to be on.

St. Matthew's is no stranger to community discernment. Community discernment was what our visioning process was all about. The community came together to figure out what really mattered for this particular congregation. We came together to wrestle with what our core values were and how we were going to try and live into them.

What anyone who has done community discernment will tell you is that it is really hard work-very hard and very blessed. Getting a group to discern together what God's will is takes skill. It takes skill and it takes surrender-surrendering what one wants or thinks is correct and being open to the possibility that God is calling the group into new possibilities and new hope. It means being open to new voices and directions and realizing that God may be speaking through other people-often times people that we wouldn't have considered.

From the earliest of prophetic times, God has chosen people to speak difficult and painful words, words that are as painful to deliver as they are to hear. But throughout the prophetic times, God has always done so to ultimately deliver a message of hope and new life. We are told time and time and time again, "See, I am doing a new thing!" God's very nature creates life and new possibilities.

It is because God's very nature is one of creation that we need not fear difficult messages.

It is because God made us and knew us from before we were made, that we can rest in the confidence that God knows what is best for us more than we could possibly know for ourselves.

It is because God first searched us out and called us by our name that we can say, "speak, for your servant is listening" and then obey God's will in what we are being asked to do.

Who is your Eli? Who is the person or persons that help you see God's movements in your life and help you discern what God is calling you to?

Who is your Samuel? Who is the one who may come to you needing that guidance in their lives? Who might have a painful message that you need to hear in order to move forward to new life?

Who is St. Matthew's Eli and St. Matthew's Samuel?

These are really important questions. I hope you will give them thought and prayer, and that we will be able to continue this conversation on an individual and corporate level and to share our answers and discoveries.

Speak Lord, for your servants are listening.

Amen.