

Sermon on John 1:43-51, 1 Samuel 3:1-20
2nd Sunday after Epiphany, January 15, 2012
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Today's Bible lessons are all about one thing: *the call of God to us humans to listen, to follow, and to serve, as witnesses to what God has done (and will do) in our lives.* In the Old Testament reading, a boy named Samuel heard the voice of God in the night, while he was serving as an apprentice to Eli, the high priest of the Temple. In the second lesson we hear the Apostle Paul tell the Corinthians that God claims our entire lives when we become disciples of our Lord – in fact, every aspect of our spiritual and physical lives has been created to “glorify God.” And in the gospel lesson, Jesus encounters two of his disciples, one named Philip, and the other named Nathanael, whom Jesus invited to “come and follow me.”

First, a word about the call of Samuel. The scripture says that in those days when the boy Samuel was “ministering to the Lord under Eli, the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” Now, we tend to think of those ancient Bible days long ago as a time when people were very used to hearing God speak, but through prophets and priests, and sometimes directly or through visions and dreams. But those olden days were much like our time: the Word of the Lord was rare, the scripture says. People had forgotten about God and the Law of Moses, living out their days “on their own”, leaving the Word of God to priests in the Temple, and a few remaining, but rare, individuals of faith. Sounds pretty similar to our own day – when lots of people are talking *about* God, or what they think God is saying to everybody else, but very few actually hear the voice of God, have visions or dream dreams – and if they do, we call them “crazy”!

In fact, when the boy Samuel first heard God's voice calling out his name while he was getting ready to sleep, he first ran to Eli's room to say, “Here I am!” But Eli hadn't called, so Samuel went back to his room. Then he heard the voice again, calling “Samuel, Samuel”, and again, he went to Eli and said, “Here I am!” Again, Eli hadn't called. But Eli was beginning to understand that this just might be God calling to Samuel. So he told Samuel to listen to what God might say. So the next time Samuel heard his name, he said “Speak, for your servant is listening.” And the voice told him that Eli's descendants would no longer serve as priests in the Temple, because they had spoken and acted against God. Samuel was afraid to tell Eli what this voice had told him. Whose voice was it, he wondered?

So the next morning, the story goes, Eli called on Samuel to tell him everything he had heard, and not to hide anything from him. He wanted the truth, good or bad. So Samuel told him the truth about what God had told him, and Eli knew that it had been the Lord's voice, because he had not been afraid to speak the

hard truth to Eli. And so the whole country knew from then on how Samuel was a trustworthy prophet – for he was never afraid to speak the word of truth from God to God’s people, especially to leaders, kings, and others in authority.

What does this story say to us, today? Well, it reminds us that God can and does speak to us, even when we don’t recognize God’s voice, or think that God isn’t speaking anymore, when we think that *God is dead* or that faith is irrelevant! And when God does speak, it is usually through the voice of a human being, or some truth revealed through a person whom we have found to be trustworthy (like Martin Luther King.) How do we know a “Word” is likely the “Word of the Lord”? When the word being spoken seems contrary to what *most of us think* is the likely truth – when it comes as a surprise, a new insight, something far different than what we humans would think to be true, but *is consistent with the characteristics of God which we have come to know: which is compassion, love, and justice for all people*. So look for the surprising word that seems contrary to what we humans believe and accept, and it could very well be the voice of God calling out to us!

Then there is the call of Philip and Nathanael in the gospel story from John. This story immediately follows that of Jesus calling his first disciples, who happened to be two of John the Baptist’s followers, who were following Jesus when he turned and asked them, “What are *you* looking for?” When they asked Jesus where he was staying, Jesus said, “*Come and see!*” Then Jesus decided to go to Galilee, found a man named Philip, and said to him, “*Follow me.*”

Now, we don’t know what Jesus and Philip talked about beyond this, or what Philip saw in Jesus that was so convincing, but Philip himself went out and found a friend of his, Nathanael, who was from a city by the sea called Bethsaida, and said “*We have found him – the one whom Moses and the prophets promised! He is the one – Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.*” Now Nathanael was skeptical, and maybe even a bit sarcastic, and said, “Can anything *good* come out of Nazareth?” (For Nazareth was this little hick town in the middle of nowhere, off the beaten path, in that backward province called Galilee – why would Philip want to go *there*?) But all Philip said was, “*Come and see [for yourself]!*”

I guess it would be like someone today from the cosmopolitan, high –falutin’ Minneapolis say, “*Can anything good come out of Saint Paul?*” Or a city slicker from Madison, Wisconsin, asks, “*Can anything good come out of Sheboygan?*” Or how about a black man, a preacher from Montgomery, Alabama? We all know some smart-alek who is sitting under a fig tree – or sipping a latte at Starbucks, and when a friend approaches them all excited-like, gushing about somebody or something special they want them to “come and see”, looks at them with suspicious disdain and says, “Of whatever good could THAT be?” But instead of arguing, the best response is “*Come and see for yourself!*” like Philip said. And then, if they get up and come along, as Nathanael did, everything is possible!

I know a guy whose name is Roy, a classmate of mine from high school, in confirmation class and youth group with me in my home church. I haven't seen Roy in years. We have gone separate ways (I think Roy still lives in Richfield.) But this past year I found him on Facebook, and friended him. Now, Roy is very cynical, disgusted with the Church and Christians today. He is always sending me messages about Christians saying hateful things or being hypocritical. But I don't argue with Roy – I often agree with him! So here it is – I'm a Lutheran pastor and he's an agnostic, non-churchgoer who is hostile to the Church, and we agree on almost everything! (Can anything good come out of Richfield?) In fact, sometimes I outdo Roy in my disgust with hypocrisy in Christians and the Church! What we agree on is how the Jesus of scripture is totally different than the religion that so many "Christians" claim to believe in. We both point to the words of Jesus that speak with love for neighbor, the Jesus that reaches out to outcasts and calls every human being a child of God. So, if I invited Roy to church for worship, I think he would say "no". But, if I say, "come on, Roy, consider this, or look at what Jesus says about this, or come and see how this person acting in faith is actually living out the values and the love that Jesus taught", Roy would be VERY interested – and just might even come along to see! Do any of you know somebody like Roy?

So what is God calling you and me to do, when Jesus calls us to follow? It's interesting that in the scripture passages we read today, the invitation is not to "come and worship", or "come and see God in the Temple or in the Church". Samuel was asked to hear God speak the truth, even when it was *against* someone Samuel worked for. Nathanael was asked by a friend to come along and see what Jesus was doing. What all the disciples were invited to come and see was God in action in the lives of other human beings out there in their world, through a man named Jesus. We seem to usually get this point backwards! Our usual goal in "evangelism" is to encounter people "out there in the world", and invite them to "come and see God's work *inside* the Church!" What the life of Jesus teaches us is that God is really at work everywhere that people are living, working, playing – which is, most of the time, OUTSIDE the Church! Jesus' invitation to Nathanael, Philip, and all the rest of his disciples was to walk alongside him in his journey through Galilee, across the Jordan River to eat with foreigners and outcasts, and finally to the holy city of Jerusalem itself – to "come and see" the power of God's love in Jesus: healing the sick, casting out demons, teaching *good* news about God, crossing human boundaries and obstacles to show God's compassion and love for every human being – every child of God. So the point of discipleship is to imitate and follow Jesus. The point of witness is not to recruit members for this church, but to invite others to come along and walk with us as we seek to see the power of God's love in words of truth and compassion today in our world. Is this a life that interests you? If so, then ya'll get out of your pews, and *let's all come and see!*