



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sunday, January 17, 2021

Scripture Passages: 1 Samuel 3:1-10 & John 1:43-51

+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Do you remember being called by your parents as a child? When your mother or your father's voice would break into your consciousness and interrupt your play or your relaxation – or perhaps your sleep – probably when you were a teenager?

I do a lot of calling in our house. Well, there are a lot of people to call. Sometimes I feel a little like a drill sergeant – only I hope a whole lot more polite – “can you do this and while he's doing that, will you do this? Please would you come and attend to this or that.” The trick is getting the names straight. I'm afraid I've succumbed to my grandmother's habit of calling us all at once – a bit like a fishing expedition to see who will actually respond – so the names come out in a jumble – Emily-Nicholas-Andrew-Olivia! Come and take out the garbage/walk the dog/come for dinner!

You see, there's a risk isn't there? If you answer the call, you might win – there might be a benefit. Equally, there might be an obligation. Now there's no real doubt that someone will answer the call – but there is some doubt as to how they'll answer it.

To be called even now as an adult holds the unknown. We can face a call with dread or expectation. For a call from someone is a disconnect with what we are doing – a break from business as usual.

In the disjunction of a call, there lies the possibility of a new start, a new direction, however surprising or even unwelcome the call was in the first place. It is a redirect.

And if we experience all this when we are called by family, work, or friend, what must it be like to be called by the Lord? It must change everything to be called by God out of sleep – a literal sleep, or a spiritual sleep, out of the sleep of the mundane – to be called by name - by God to become the fullest version of who you were created to be.

The story of Samuel who was to become a prophet and a judge – a leader in the nation of Israel is one of the most popular in scripture. Hannah his mother was unable to have a child. In her sorrow and longing she promised that if she were to have a child that she would give the child back to the service of God. And of course, she does bear a son. Accordingly, as soon as he was weaned, he was given to Eli the High Priest to serve in the Temple. And we pick up the story when he was about 12 or 13.

One night, Samuel is woken from sleep because God has called him.

God has called him in order to speak with him, through him to his people. His first task after this experience of being called is a difficult one. He is not simply affirmed as God's servant, he has to speak hard words to Eli about his own son's behaviour. They have been irresponsible and self-centred priests and so the Lord will punish them. Eli recognizes the significance of Samuel's call and demands to know the content of the Lord's communication to the little boy.

Because as Christians, we are so familiar with the high points of this story – the call – Samuel, Samuel - and the answer – Speak Lord for your servant is listening, I think we forget perhaps the remarkable nature of what has occurred. In calling Samuel – this young boy – and not Eli, the high priest, God signaled a disconnect with the religious order. In calling Samuel and not Eli, God demonstrated Eli's own deafness to God's voice about a serious situation with his own sons. To call Samuel was not only to break with Eli, but it was to redirect Samuel's path. Samuel's call was not an easy one. Immediately he had hard words to speak and a difficult situation to create. But that is the risk of a call, isn't it? The difficult comes with the privilege of service. Samuel of course went on to be a prophet and a judge. We are told that his life prospered – that God did not let any of his words fall to the ground.

And all through a quiet but insistent call. A call that came out of silence. A call that came in the night. I think that's interesting too.

In the night, when there are no distractions, do you hear God's voice calling? Redirecting you? Discomfiting? Something for us to think about in what is for some of us quieter times during the Pandemic. God often speaks in a still, small voice, . . .

And what of our next call stories? We encounter Jesus in the Gospel of John collecting disciples this morning. He's asked Simon and Andrew and Philip to come and follow him. And they do. And then Philip is bold enough to approach his friend Nathanael to let him know who they've met in Jesus of Nazareth.

This gospel is a great epiphany gospel. Epiphany comes from the Greek – epiphaneia – meaning manifestation. The Gospels are all about the revelation of Jesus’ identity and when the disciples first meet Jesus they experienced a showing – a telling/revealing of God and we can see how deeply it affected them. John shows the disciples slowly realizing who and what has come into their lives.

Simon and Andrew and Philip seem totally convinced about Jesus – so much so that they’ve staked everything on the fact that he’s the Messiah. Everything. They’ve left home and livelihoods and kin to follow a guy who comes from Nazareth – a nobody.

So it’s not surprising that Nathanael appears a little unimpressed. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” he says.

We don’t know why he says that – honestly. The comment could derive from regional prejudices, it could derive from Nathanael’s own personality, it could simply be a rhetorical device. But it does rather set the scene for an interesting interplay between Nathanael and Jesus. Jesus suddenly present, says, “Here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit” meaning I think, “well at least he’s honest.” Apparently Jesus appreciates his honesty. Nathanael sounds skeptical, he doesn’t as yet believe. But Philip invites Nathanael to discover significance in Jesus. “Come and see,” he says. What a winsome way to offer the gift of faith.

Jesus, as always, is his unsettling self and so Nathanael soon sees and believes. In order to elicit a response to his call, Jesus demonstrates a little – a very little – of who he is in saying that he has known Nathanael, seen Nathanael since he was under the fig tree.

Doesn’t sound like a lot does it? And yet it’s enough to convince Nathanael that Jesus is who he says – or rather who the other disciples say he is – the fulfillment of prophecy.

At least one scholar suggested that Nathanael’s reaction had longer legs than what is immediately apparent in this story. There was a suggestion that the image of the fig tree was an iconic one – perhaps even a utopian one for the faithful Jew. In Micah 4:4 it says,

And each of them will sit under his vine and under his fig tree, with no one to make {them} afraid, for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

For Jews this is a picture of a time when they are free from oppression – free to worship God and to live in peace. This would have been a wonderful image for a Jew living under the Roman occupation.

And so, for Jesus to say, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you,” and hearing those words in the context of the biblical tradition was possibly like saying; “Nathanael, I knew you before you were cynical.

I knew you when your heart could still be melted, when your faith was still tender. That's the Nathanael that I have seen."

And of course this is consistent with God's vision – Over and again, in the Gospels, Jesus does not see people the way they are—he sees people for who they could be. He sees bodies oppressed by illness and he makes them whole. He sees sinners weighed down by their sin and he sets them free. And in Nathanael he sees a man who had once wanted to believe but has been hardened by a difficult and unresponsive world. To that man—he gave back wonder and belief – and something to live and strive for.

This experience of Jesus – where Jesus goes to the very heart of the matter – Nathaniel's heart - moves Nathanael so much that he responds in much loftier terms than even the others by saying "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel."

Clearly this call changes everything. In this encounter where Nathanael is invited to meet Jesus, and then is known – deeply known by the Lord - God has searched him out and known him – he is promised, in answer to his call, a life in which he will experience a journey of spiritual depth and width.

Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see greater things than these." And indeed Nathanael will soon see the Christ in action, he will see the teaching and the healing --- and he will see Jesus go to the cross for us and most profoundly of all, he will see and experience Jesus' resurrection.

He will experience the risen Christ firsthand and will know the light and life of the Holy Spirit as it gave strength and urgency to his ministry.

It's not an easy life that Nathanael accepts when he answers Jesus' call but it's a rich one – it's a transformative one. It's not all signs and wonders. Jesus is famously dismissive of that kind of faith – "do you believe me because I saw you under the fig tree?" There is difficulty and danger and fear and sorrow. But there is life – more life than there would have been had Nathanael remained in his skepticism and not answered the call of the Lord.

Call stories are precious to us in scripture. They are records of the journey we all take as believers. And so in some sense they act as templates: they show us what it is to be called and known and promised life in Christ.

These accounts also act as reassurances – that others have experienced the call of God on their lives. Others have been invited and known and promised. Others have had their lives redirected in surprising and ultimately rich and wonderful ways. The call stories of Gideon – the least in his tribe, of Moses - called from a lofty height to do God's work, Mary, the mother of Jesus – called to be the God-bearer; of Lydia called to use her resources for the Gospel, of all the disciples called from ordinary life – these accounts reassure us that we're not alone in this journey to become God's servants in his world.

And we can include ourselves in this call. I know my life has been different, unexpected, unpredictable and absolutely wonderful because of God's call on it.

We have all been called in our own lives by the voice of God to follow Jesus to places we might not go had we not answered the call. And like Samuel and Andrew and Simon Peter and Philip – and yes, like the reluctant Nathanael, we continue the process of answering the Lord and continuing that journey with God – not knowing where it will take us, but trusting that answering the call is better than sleeping through life - even if it's not easier.

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