

Epiphany 2 - Year B

I'm going to tell a story on Henry this morning. A few weeks ago, I called on their house phone, and when Henry answered, I said, "Hello, Henry, how are you doing today?" and the response I got was, "Who is this?!!" And so I said, it's Diane – your rector – joking at him. And he said, "Well, you need to identify yourself right away! You should say, "Hello, this is Diane calling." And so when I call their house now, I do as directed! "Hello, this is Diane calling." - Most folks don't even answer their phone anymore if they don't recognize the number, if they don't know who is calling. We've gotten spoiled by caller ID. Some folks who have an answering machine screen their calls and don't pick up until you start talking. We want to know who is calling! And we are rightfully suspicious of people who seem to know *our* names when we don't know theirs! But all those identifying devices only work if the number is already in our phone attached to someone's name, or the number is tucked in our brain's memory – which is a long shot – or we recognize the voice on the answering machine.

The issue of knowing who is calling is the start of our first reading today from the book of Samuel. Here's the back story on Samuel: His mother Hannah had prayed and prayed for a child, and when she finally did give birth to Samuel, she dedicated him to God in Thanksgiving. She literally took him to the temple, to Eli the priest – so that Eli could raise him. That's why we have a "boy" named Samuel lying down near the ark of God in the temple. When Samuel hears his name called, he assumes it is Eli – after all, who else is around? The writer even tells us, "Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him." God's number was not in Samuel's phone. So Samuel repeatedly goes to Eli, saying, "Here I am, you called me." On the third try, Eli catches on... he says, "Ah! The *Lord* is calling you..."

So here's a question: Why is the Lord trying to get Samuel's attention instead of talking to Eli the priest? Why – as we are told – was the Word of the Lord rare in those days, and visions not widespread? The answers come out in the second part of our reading that we don't often hear. Eli has been a priest for a long time. Two of his sons are priests in the temple. But Eli has mostly been sitting on a throne, and his two sons have been taking the meat sacrificed to God and having some big feasts with their friends. And they have been raping the women attending to the temple – the Altar guild, if you will. In other words, they are abusing their power, abusing others, not living out their call. And Eli has known about it, but has done nothing. Oh, he talked to them; but he did nothing to stop what they were doing, nothing to keep them from exploiting the poor or abusing the women. He could have taken away their place in the temple, their privileges. He could have protected the poor and the women. But

he didn't want to lose his own place in the power structure. It was easier to keep still and let things be.

So after Eli recognizes that it is *God* who is speaking to Samuel – he has a clue that there will be a message from God that he, Eli, might not want to hear. He already knows he has not been living the way of God. – For Samuel's part, once he puts himself at God's disposal, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening!" – he is given a message that will indeed shake things up, or as God says, "will make both ears of those who hear tingle." God is firing Eli – "for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them."

No wonder Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli, to pass on that kind of message, to speak a word from the Lord that will change the way things have been. But Samuel spoke the word of the Lord anyway. We are told in conclusion that all Israel knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

If you printed off the bulletin, you'll have seen that the whole second part of the reading is in brackets – meaning we could have omitted it – and we often do. But on this Sunday, the day after Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday and the day before we celebrate it as a nation, we needed to hear the entire story – because in that story, we have a glimpse of what it means to respond to God's call, and what it means to be a prophet, someone willing to speak a message from God.

Like Samuel giving bad news to Eli, like Moses called to tell Pharaoh to "let my people go!" – like Jesus, preaching the message that God's way is a way of love, that God's power is found in mercy – modern prophets are often not esteemed in their time, but only after they are gone. While they are speaking to us, their words can sound threatening to some, even as they are beacons of hope to others. It takes courage to listen for the voice of God, and even more courage to respond. We honor Martin Luther King, Jr. because he spoke what he heard God say to him. He wasn't perfect, but he tried to be a faithful prophet, by calling us to become the Beloved Community that is God's dream for us, God's people – *all* God's people.

Of course, God speaks to *all* of us. Really. God speaks to each of us. But we have to be able to recognize the voice – to know who is calling. We need a way to know whose voice we are hearing.

In the first reading, we were told, “Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord...” Samuel was “lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was,” – but he did not yet know the Lord. So here’s a news flash: Simply being in the house of God does not mean that we know God. It can be a good start, but it doesn’t guarantee that we will “know” God or God’s voice.

It takes a couple of tries before Eli finally catches on. But “Then Eli perceived that the *Lord* was calling the boy.” And so Eli tells Samuel to *respond* to God, to enter into conversation, into *relationship* with the God he cannot see but who nevertheless is obviously present. “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.” In saying those words, Samuel is acknowledging God’s presence, and his own presence. God and Samuel are now present to one another. And the knowing and being known has begun.

The way we will come to recognize the voice – to know who is calling – is to develop a relationship with the One who is calling. It is about knowing and being known.

Today’s Gospel brings us another vignette about that knowing and being known. In the verses preceding today’s passage from John’s Gospel, two of the disciples of John the Baptist have already been invited to “come and see” where he lives. One of these two was Andrew, who then goes off to tell his brother, Peter, that they have found the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One. So Peter comes to *be* with Jesus, too. And that’s where our passage for today picks up. Jesus decides to go to Galilee and invites Phillip, who was from Peter’s and Andrew’s hometown, to follow him. And then Phillip runs off and tells his friend Nathaniel, “We have found the one written about by Moses and the Prophets – he’s the son of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth.”

But Nathaniel is not easily convinced. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” He’s a “hard sell.” How many times do we dismiss the voice of God calling, because it comes from someone or someplace we disregard? Still, Phillip convinces him, too, to “come and see.” Come and find out for yourself. And once he meets Jesus, Nathaniel discovers that he was *known* by Jesus even before Nathaniel decided to try to get to know *Jesus*, before he got up to “come and see.”

We are already known by God. We prayed Psalm 139 together: “O Lord, you have searched me out and known me.” So yes, we are known. But how do we set about the task of *knowing*? How can we come to recognize the voice when we hear it?

In the gospel, we are told to “come and see.” Eli tells Samuel to listen and respond, “Here I am. Speak, Lord; your servant is listening.” We have to want to know, and be willing to be known.

At our deepest level, I believe we are hungry to know and be known. We are hungry for relationship. But so much at the heart of relationship is simply “being with.” Think of the relationships in your life that you value, and the people with whom you are in relationship: your spouse, your children or parents, your close friends. My guess is that, when you have time with those people, you don’t care what you do together, you simply want to *be* together. You simply want to enjoy one another’s presence. You can rest in knowing and being known.

It’s the same with our relationship with God. God is really not concerned with what we do in the time we choose to spend with God, frankly. God is simply present, waiting for us to be present. Whether we are sleeping in the temple like Samuel, or praying with the Scriptures under the fig tree like Nathaniel, or fishing for fun or livelihood like Peter and Andrew, God is present – and we have only to open our eyes and ears and hearts to know it.

I’ve spoken before about my cousin, Sr. Rose Mary, who had been a Franciscan nun for years when I heard her give a talk on prayer. She, like Nathaniel, was a person with no guile or deceit. And what she said, after years of praying, was this: I sit in my chair and say, “Here I am, God. And here you are. Here we are together.” And then we look lovingly at each other and just be together.”

It may be easier to be in relationship with God – to know and be known there – than with one another, of course. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don’t know each other; they don’t know each other because they have not communicated with each other.” But perhaps we can make a start in the direction of knowing one another by just sitting in the heart of God and recognizing that “the other” – whoever that may be for us – is already there in the heart of God with us.

Take some time this week. Be like Nathaniel, and pray with the Scripture – with Psalm 139. “O God, you have probed me and you know me.” And then, like Samuel, say to God, “Here I am. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” And then, knowing that you are really present, and God is really present, just be together in the quiet – and hold in that quiet of God all those we did not expect to find there.

May it be so.

Amen.

[Isaiah 43:1-7](#) [Acts 8:14-17](#) [Luke 3:15-17, 21-22](#) [Psalm 29](#)