

“Light for the Way”

Reading: 1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51

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We don't know just how old Samuel was when God spoke to him in the middle of the night in the episode we read about in our first Scripture reading, but he was probably pretty young. Old enough to speak, obviously, but still too young to be considered a man. Maybe in his early teens at most, maybe quite a bit younger. In any case, he was young enough that we're meant to think it's odd for God to be speaking to him like He did. If we were to continue on in the chapter, we would learn that God had a message of warning for the priest Eli and his sons, who were abusing their position of power as religious leaders. God told Samuel that Eli's family would be judged. Why would God give this message to a youth, rather than just speaking directly to Eli himself? Samuel is young and inexperienced enough that he doesn't even realize what's happening at first; it takes Eli's wisdom to help Samuel discern the voice of God. Maybe we should wonder why God is bothering to speak an important message about the fate of a nation to a child. Is a child really a reliable messenger?

And in fact when you think about it, when you put this story in the larger context of times when God calls out to a person or chooses a person or gives them a vision or sends them a messenger, it's a really unusual event. There are lots of Bible characters who are given some special mission or whose birth is foretold by an angel or something like that, but usually the message goes straight to the grown-ups, as we would expect. I mean, we certainly place enormous value on children, but we don't always place the highest value on their testimony. If a child tells you there's a fairy living in the bushes, you might play along, but you'll hardly believe them. Usually in our Bible stories we hear about God sending a messenger to a pair of soon-to-be parents to tell them that their child will be special; the message goes to the grown-ups. Or, maybe more often, the special mission comes to the person when they're an adult.

But not so with Samuel. Apparently God does not share our default view that children aren't big enough to play a role in grown-up things. In fact, Samuel plays a very unique role in God's story, because the message of doom that he brings to Eli's family is also a message of destiny for Samuel. This boy doesn't realize it yet, but he stands at a turning point in the history of what God is doing. He's the last of the judges, a line of wartime leaders who were chosen to serve and save God's people in times of danger. But he's also a prophet, one who carries God's messages to the people, and in that role he will one day anoint the first of Israel's kings and usher in a new age. And God doesn't think he's too little to start that task. God doesn't overlook him in his smallness or inexperience. God sees him and calls him, even when everyone else might not think he's worth it or ready for it.

And in fact that's something we often see in God's work. He is, as the psalmist says, a “father to the fatherless, a defender of widows...God sets the lonely in families, He leads out the prisoners with singing.” Hagar even calls Him “The God Who Sees Me.” Her story is a sad one: she was the slave of Abraham and Sarah, and when Sarah couldn't have a child, she ordered Hagar to take her place. When Hagar gets pregnant, she gets too full of herself, and her mistress mistreats her, causing Hagar to take her chances by running off into the wilderness. And God meets her there. It turns out that her child will not end up being the heir to God's promises to Abraham, but even so, God sees this mistreated, runaway slave woman. We could tell story after story of the neglected, inexperienced, outcast, screw-ups that God sees in spite of their failures and impurities, and He calls to them.

We have some issues in our culture with being seen. We want to be seen, but we want it on our terms. We strive for social connection, but our Facebook profiles are curated like an English manor garden: I'll only post my best photos and my wittiest thoughts online for all to see, because I want you to see the best of me and think that's my normal. We are desperate to be seen and valued by others because we were created to be social creatures who live in communion with one another and with God, but our sin and our shame turns communion into desperate attention-seeking. I want you to see me as I want to be seen, but I certainly don't want you to see me as I actually am, because then you might reject me. And so we live in fear that no one will see us, but also in fear that someone might see too much of us.

And at the same time, we're living in an age when being seen takes on a whole new meaning. In recent years we have become disturbingly accustomed to hearing new revelations about how companies track our every movement online. We regularly hear about massive breaches of the personal information or credit card data of millions of people when stores or websites are hacked. And it's come to light just how much surveillance our own government does on its own people in the name of national security. We are seen all the time by many unseen eyes, and how we are seen is sometimes used in unknown or even nefarious ways. Privacy has taken on new meanings and a new urgency. While we want to be seen by others and in some cases we're desperate to be seen by others, at the same time we have deep fears about the power others have over us when they see too much. Seeing can be powerful, and so being seen can be intimidating.

But God's sight is different. It's something we have to learn and re-learn throughout our lives, I think, because it's so easy to picture God sort of glaring down at us from above, rather than watching over us or seeing us as the Bible shows. It's easy to think that God is keeping an eye on us to make sure we don't step out of line, like He's just waiting to catch us in the act so He can add another mark to our list of sins, because what God really wants to do is punish us when we die so He can vent His wrath. We have a negative view of God seeing us because of all our fears related to how other people see us: they jump to conclusions, they have impure motives, they only see part of the story. But God's not like that. He sees us — each one of us — as we truly are, not as we want ourselves to appear, not even as we *think* we are, but as we truly are.

The story of Nathanael's call so neatly encapsulates the themes we see in Samuel's call and so many other stories. We're still in this season after Christmas, still basking in the glow of Epiphany, still playing with the light that shines from God in the arrival of Christ. And what we see in these stories of seeing and calling is that as God sees us, He illuminates us, He pours out His light into our souls, and that light shines on the path ahead of us. God's sight helps us see who we really are and what we are called to do and be in His light. Even though we only catch a brief glimpse of Nathanael, a future Apostle, we see that in a moment God discerns this man for who he is and calls him to mission.

It comes right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He is just beginning to be visible in public, and one of the first things He does is to draw together a group of disciples. In John's gospel there is this wonderful refrain in this episode of "come and see." Jesus invites His first disciples to "come and see" what He's up to, and then the disciples offer the same invitation to other disciples. And as Nathanael comes to see Jesus — somewhat cautiously at first — Jesus reveals that Nathanael is the

one who has been seen: “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit,” Jesus says. Jesus has already discerned something about the core of this man; his soul has been seen by God.

It’s not clear exactly what all was going on. When Nathanael questions Jesus, Jesus responds by saying that He saw Nathanael while he was “still under the fig tree.” One thought is that fig trees were a traditional place for people to gather to study Scripture and learn from rabbis, and so Jesus saw Nathanael from afar and could tell that he was a student earnestly seeking to learn more about God. Whatever the meaning is, it’s enough to convince Nathanael, who makes a powerful statement of faith right then and there. And Jesus’ response is that Nathanael’s faith will be rewarded: he will see “heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” Nathanael trusts Jesus’ discernment, and if he continues to follow Jesus he will see that Jesus is the focal point in the merger between heaven and earth.

That’s all fine for Bible characters. After all, they’re just parts of a story, where they can’t do us any harm. But the reason the Bible is so important to us is not just because it tells the stories of Samuel and Hagar and Nathanael, but because it tells us *our* story. God worked in that way in the ancient past, and it’s relevant for us today because He still works that way in your life and mine.

Once again, God’s sight is different. We may try to hide parts of our lives in dark corners, and there are things we may try desperately to keep off of Facebook for fear that others will see the truth of our lives. We may fear the all-seeing eyes of the government or hackers or advertisers. But God’s sight is different. God sees you, the true you. He sees each one of us — children, slaves, scholars, whether you’re important or insignificant, whether you’re ashamed or prideful — He sees right through your soul, right to the truth of you. The God of all creation, the God who spoke the universe into order, the God who gave Himself on the cross, sees and knows you.

And then He calls to you. He knows who you are, He knows what you’re like, He knows what you’ve done right and what you’ve done wrong, He knows your joys and your pains, and then He calls to you. He invites you, He shines His light on a path for you and calls you to walk it. You see, God’s sight is different than ours. He doesn’t see people because He’s judgmental or lustful or curious or competitive. He sees people because He knows them, He loves them, and He invites them to walk in His ways.

Often when we talk about God calling people we think of a specific call to some type of ministry or mission or message. We think of Samuel with his call to prophecy, or Nathanael or Paul or Peter with their calls to be Apostles. We think of people like pastors or missionaries who discern a “call to the ministry.” Mine came one night at a Wesleyan youth conference in December of 1994. I was fourteen years old, hadn’t really thought about what I wanted to do with my life, and I sensed God calling me in a way that I had never experienced before or since. I later questioned that call, struggled against it, fought it, even, but I couldn’t get away from it.

That’s often what we think of when we talk about God calling people, that He’s calling them to lifelong professional ministry. But that’s really only the tip of the iceberg. Every single person has a call from God on their lives, and it’s the first and most important call of them all: “come and see.” Every one of you is called to walk in the light of God, to follow Christ, to know Him and love Him and draw near to Him. No call to pastoral ministry or missionary work in the farthest part of the world or

leadership in the church is greater or more important than that call to respond to God's love for you with faithfulness to Him.

But beyond that there may be a more specific call that God has placed on your life. Maybe He is calling you to some sort of professional ministry, but that's far from the only sort of call. Maybe He's calling you to some other sort of work, or to a relationship with someone in need, or a volunteer position, or to give a message of encouragement or warning to someone, or...the list goes on. And the troublesome thing about these sorts of calls is that none of our usual excuses work against them. You can't tell God that you can't do what He's calling you to because you're too young or old or rich or poor or anything else, because God calls whosoever He will. It only depends on you listening for God's call, and trusting that whatever He calls you to, He will gift you for it, and trusting that if you heed His call it will be the best path for you.

Jesus Christ is the light of the world. He came to shine the light of God into our lives, and that light shines through our souls and reveals who we really are in Christ, and who we were meant to be. How is God calling you today? Are you listening?



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