

# "Seeing Greater Things"

1 Samuel 3:1-20 and John 1:43-51

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday Following the Epiphany, January 18, 2009

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1 Samuel 3:1-20

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Then the Lord said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever." Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

## Prayer.

In today's Hebrew scriptures we hear the story of the call of Samuel.

In our Gospel lesson we experience the calling of Nathanael.

It makes us kind of wonder if our lessons are asking us to focus on the call of God.

Can we use them to give light to God's call on our own lives?

The call of Samuel brings back memories of my own Sunday school years.

It is a story that energizes the imagination

Because it is so real and down to earth.

Each of us can see ourselves in Samuel's shoes:

Hearing God's voice speak three times

And innocently assuming it was Eli calling out to him in the night.

Eli, the Temple priest,

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Had taken in the boy, Samuel,  
Whose birth he had prophesized,  
And whose mother, Hannnah,  
Had presented to the Lord,  
And left to the foster care of Eli.  
The young boy, Samuel, did not yet know the Lord;  
But his foster father did.  
As the temple priest,  
He was charged with the stewardship of the Temple  
And the ark that resided in it.  
Eli shook the cobwebs from his sleep  
and recognized the fact that it was the Lord calling out to Samuel.  
He coaches Samuel, saying:  
"Go, lie down;  
and if he calls you, you shall say,  
'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."  
Samuel obediently does so,  
And the word of the Lord is revealed to him.  
Unfortunately, the word was not so kind.  
The word was punishment that would come to Eli  
For the sins of his sons  
And for Eli's failure to restrain them.  
Ouch.

The call of Nathanael  
Also draws us in because of its real world connections.  
Each of us can see ourselves in Nathanael's shoes;  
Slamming neighboring communities  
- like, can anything good come out of Lyons? -  
and responding to our zealot friends with skepticism,  
reluctantly agreeing to a minimal response,  
"yea, OK, I'll come and see.  
(If I have to)"  
The greeting of Jesus almost sound as if it comes from a politician:  
Now here is an honest man; good to meet you, old chap!  
You know me from somewhere? Nathanael asks.  
I saw you under a fig tree, before Philip invited you to come and see.  
Knowing what he should not have known  
Lifted the blinders from Nathanael's eyes  
And he saw Jesus for who he was:  
Rabbi, (a teacher)  
You are the Son of God! (God and human ... talk about an epiphany)  
You are the King of Israel! (finally, God's throwing us a life line)

You believe just because you see me?  
Baby, you ain't seen nothing yet!  
Almost reminiscent of Jacob's ladder,  
Jesus paints the canvas  
Of himself (the Son of Man)  
being the connection between heaven and earth,  
The conduit through which angels go up  
and come down to rest upon him.  
In retrospect  
We, 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, can also  
Look back and see that Jesus  
Is connecting the dots,  
Planting the seeds  
For his death, resurrection, and ascension.

Incarnation  
Turns skepticism on its head.  
And Nathanael believes.  
A simple, friendly invitation was all it took.  
Jesus did the rest.  
Not only does Nathanael believe  
He is promised  
"You will be my witness  
- who I am and why I've come -  
you will be my witness  
to the world."

So where does it leave us?  
Where do these two Biblical passages intersect with our lives today?  
A few thoughts:<sup>1</sup>

1. Skepticism is normal and natural; it should be expected.

We are no different than Nathanael  
When it comes to skepticism.  
Truth is, skepticism  
Is natural,  
Instinctive;  
It's about self-preservation.

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<sup>1</sup> All six of these reflections come with thanks to Beth Tanner, Assistant Professor of Old Testament, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, New Brunswick, NJ and to Stephen Hultgren, Assistant Professor of Theology, Fordham University, New York, NY

It can cause the release of hormones that cause fight or flight.  
We learn to be a skeptic in this world to stay alive,  
But when that same skepticism is translated to faith  
It can protect our vulnerabilities.  
It can also lead to a disproportionate resistance to God.  
We want to believe.  
That makes us open to every huckster, scam artist, and snake oil salesman on the planet.  
That makes us vulnerable to gambling, abusing drugs, and peer pressure.  
Yet, skepticism tells us to hold back,  
Wait and see,  
And let someone else go first.  
The second, often unmentioned portion of skepticism,  
Belief and skepticism are not mutually exclusive.  
It is an abrupt wake up call to the new believer  
That once they believe,  
Skepticism remains.  
Belief and skepticism are mutual partners  
On the journey of faith.  
It allows one to say, "I believe. Lord help my unbelief!"

2. We must address the ease with which we may miss God's call, or attribute it to others instead.

God speaks to us all the time, but, oh, how we like to deny it.  
We call it kismet, luck, or coincidence  
When actually it is God hard at work  
Attempting to hurdle our efforts at disbelief,  
To touch and bless our lives.  
Do we really think this is all there is?  
What can be seen, touched, and felt?  
Then explain to me the characteristics of the cosmos that can not be experienced by our natural senses: radio waves, gamma radiation, dark matter, and energy.  
God is the cosmic God,  
And we haven't even scratched the surface  
When it comes to our awareness  
Of God's presence  
And intervention  
In our daily lives.  
Life is a God-incident  
And until we overcome our doubt  
We will be unsettled,  
Unsatisfied,  
Always thirsty for more.

### 3. Judgment and preconceptions may be incorrect.

It is human nature to want to divide and exclude people,  
To place everyone into categories  
Based on our values and beliefs.  
This is the lifeblood of stereotypes and predigests.  
Whether it be other races or religions, other genders or sexual expressions, other area codes or dialects, the way we dress or how we look – we tend to judge people and make assumptions about them before we even say, “Good morning, welcome to Zion.”  
You come from Nazareth? We ask with a sneer.  
Perhaps it would be better to say,  
“I don’t know much about Nazareth.  
Tell me what makes it special for you?”  
Imagine,  
John Lennon invited us to dream,  
A world without borders,  
No walls or fences,  
A world where all are included  
And known as one global village,  
One people of God.

### 4. God doesn’t always call the expected ones.

In fact, God has a long history  
Of calling the unexpected:  
Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and David were all unlikely choices.  
God took Saul and turned him upside down and inside out!  
God must have had a sense of humor, because He calls me.  
(God ahead and laugh, because God calls you, too!)  
So, before we dismiss  
The lowly  
The despised  
The homeless  
The last, the least, or the lost;  
Before we say, “Let them rot in jail,”  
Or “they got what was coming to them,”  
Perhaps these scriptures will cause us to stop and pay attention.  
That very one  
May be one called and sent by God.  
Be they pirates from Somolia,  
Refugees from the Gaza,  
Or cave dwellers in Afghanistan,

May we be mindful that  
God doesn't always call those we most expect.

5. God call to serve does not mean it will be easy.

Bad news, Samuel.  
God has called you to proclaim judgment,  
Which is going to make you an unpopular guy.  
Same is true today.  
Being a faithful disciple of Jesus  
Means that we are not going to always be following the crowd.  
We may not always be in the majority.  
We may not be popular.  
But being faithful is more important than being nice.  
Most of us are sufficiently aware and well experienced to know that following Jesus doesn't  
grant an exemption to anyone from life's earthy trials or pains.  
Often times, following Jesus will put us in the eye of the storm.  
Like firemen who are crazy enough to run into a burning building while everyone else is running  
out,  
So too is the Christian  
Called to serve  
Sometimes in the most difficult of circumstances  
One can find on the planet.

6. Does the church give people the vision to see Jesus clearly?

Come and see, Philip invited the skeptic.  
Come and see for yourself  
What being a part of the community of faith can do for you.  
Attach yourself to the body of Christ,  
Not the body of flesh,  
As Paul mentioned today,  
But, see what you can do and see how you benefit  
By attaching yourself to the body of Christ.  
Problem is,  
Many of us create the illusion  
That this means joining the church,  
Following doctrine,  
Or becoming religious.  
This has nothing to do with organized religion.  
It has everything to do  
With eliminating the barriers  
That keep people from becoming attached to the Body of Christ.

Do our efforts help them see clearly?  
Or do we fill their stereotype?

There is so much more to the call  
Than what is found in these short passages this morning.  
It can fill a book or two or three.  
But, may you consider  
God's call for your life.  
Allow your beliefs and values to surface.  
Re-evaluate where you've been, where you're at, and where God is leading you to go.  
Socrates said that the unexamined life isn't worth living,  
So examine yourself  
Watch for the movement of God.  
Expect his presence, even in his absence.  
Become comfortable with doubt, even though you truly believe.  
And be the blessings  
That comes with being attached to the body;  
The Body of Christ.  
Amen.