

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

Today we hear about two greats from the Bible.

(You will of course excuse me if I am a bit prejudiced).

First we hear the calling of Samuel,

the boy child of Hannah dedicated to the temple,

who would soon to become the prophet of Israel.

Second we hear the calling of Nathanael,

the simple sceptic from Cana,

who was soon to become disciple and apostle of Christ.

In these two different narratives

we hear of God's nurturing care for the once and future church.

We often describe the church as a gift from God to us, and it is,

but, like Nathanael, I am enough of a sceptic

to also see the church as our human attempt to institutionalize God.

It is important to remember two basic truths about the church.

The first truth

that enlightens even the darkest institutional corners of the church

is that God is there,

even there in those dark institutional corners,

loving us,

correcting our missteps,

And guiding our plans and programs.

Working through even our mistakes

to further reveal the kingdom of God.

Balanced off against this hopeful truth,

is the more cautionary truth

that God doesn't need the church. At all.

If we stop responding  
to the loving and correcting urges that God sends us through the Spirit  
and wander off in our own direction,  
following our own will instead of God's will,  
God can, and most certainly will  
use someone else  
to accomplish the salvation of the world.

It is important to remember both of these truths.

They keep us from both losing hope  
and falling into complacency.

How many times have you found yourself struggling to find your way,  
feeling cut off from God,  
or pushing against an obstruction in your life.

It feels dark,  
or lonely,  
or frightening,  
and sometimes all three at the same time.

Then suddenly the way opens before you  
and the path is clear  
and God is there and all is right with the world.

If you take the time to look back and examine the struggle  
you will see in many little ways,  
God acting to get you through.

And more often than not,  
you will see times when you were even struggling against God,  
though you didn't know it at the time.

And even more miraculously,  
you may have found times when God took your wrong actions  
and actually worked good with them.

This remembering and reflecting is the important and mindful work  
of building your faith when you don't need it,  
as a way to prepare for the times when you will.

Times like now, when division and politics  
make it hard to be hopeful,  
and dangerous to be complacent.



Samuel means, "asked of God."

If you remember the beginning of Samuel's history,  
he was the answer to his mother Hannah's prayers for a male child,  
a child for whom she had been praying for many years,  
and a child for whom she had endured much shame;  
a child for whom she had almost given up hope.

Today we hear that Samuel is the answer to another person's prayers as well.

The prayers of Eli.

Eli, the priest of Shiloh, was getting old,  
and he lived, as the narrative tells, in a time when the word of God was rare.  
He saw his sons totally out of control  
and he was no longer able to restrain them.

They too were priests of Shiloh,  
but they had abused their trust and blasphemed against the Lord.

And so Eli was afraid.

Afraid for the Shiloh he had worked so hard to build up,  
and would be leaving behind when he died.

Afraid for the people that were being led astray.

His eyes were growing dim. And his heart as well.

And so he just sat in the dark  
waiting for the lamp of God to go out.

Forever.

Can you feel his fear, and sadness, and hopelessness?

And then, into that darkness came the answer to his prayers,  
in the shape of a small boy left on the steps of Shiloh  
as an offering of thanksgiving.

Though the house of Eli may be no more, through Samuel, Shiloh would go on.  
The Almighty would not abandon God's people.

And though Eli's eyes were failing,  
his ears were working just fine.

He knew the answer to a prayer when he heard it.

“Samuel... Samuel.”



Nathanael means “gift of God.”

When first we meet Nathanael

he is staring in amused disbelief at a breathless Philip  
– “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Philip has sought him out,  
him specifically,

as soon as he had received his own call to follow.

We hear nothing of the specifics of Philip's response,  
just that he immediately goes in search of Nathanael,  
and implores him to, “Come and see!”

Have you ever had a friend that you wanted to share everything with?  
A kindred soul?

This story makes you wonder...

What if the specifics of Philip's response are just that;  
his search for Nathanael?

What if the specifics of Philip's response

are the impulsive, compulsive need to share the good news?

In the other Gospels, other disciples leave everything and follow Jesus.

In John's Gospel, Philip doesn't leave everything, he brings a friend.  
It is an interesting and telling fact that in John's Gospel,  
the only disciple specifically asked by *Jesus* to join the fellowship,  
is Philip.

All the other disciples that are invited into the community,  
are invited by other disciples.

John is telling us something – something important.  
Invitation lies at the core of all healthy Christian community.  
Exclusivity will be its death.

In this the season of Epiphany,  
the season of the year when we in the church  
celebrate the revelation of God's Son to the wider world,  
it is a good time for us to re-examine  
how *we* have been responding to our own call.

As we hear again the stories of the early ministry of Jesus  
and the gathering of the men and women  
that would eventually become the church,  
we have the opportunity  
to see back beyond the institution we have become,  
to the committed group of believers that saw a different way,  
and to reflect on how *we* might better continue to live in that way.

As we watch again the growing of that early group in both faith and numbers,  
we are reminded of the importance of our own growth  
and the importance of sharing that different way.

A different way of living in the world and with each other.

Can you remember the first time you came to church?

Do you remember why?

I can tell you it was probably because somebody invited you.  
And not because they wanted another body in the pew,

or another pledge in the books.

They invited you because they loved what they were doing  
and wanted to share it with someone else that they cared about.

They invited you because they thought you would be better for it.

We can try and develop a program to grow this church,  
but that's going about it the hard way.

The mission we seek to undertake  
is nothing less than God's mission to the world;  
the work of reconciling us to God and to each other.

If we can find our piece of that mission, and keep that in our hearts,  
the rest will take care of itself.

We will invite people without even thinking about it.

Not because we need to grow the church,  
but because we want to change the world.

The people will see it in our faces, and our hearts, and our actions.

And like Nathanael, they will wonder what has gotten into us.

You see, if you think about it, when it gets right down to it,

Nathanael didn't really go to see Jesus at all,  
he went to see what had gotten into Philip.

Bishop Deon constantly reminded us

that the bar to invite people to church is lower now than it has ever been before.

All the excuses are gone.

All of the deterrents have evaporated.

They can attend in their jammies with a cup of coffee in their hands if they want.

They can visit and stay as long as they like,  
and leave with the click of a mouse

with no need to embarrass themselves or anybody else.

Now really is the time!

What is it about your faith that excites you?

Have you, like Philip,

developed an irresistible urge to share that excitement with your friends?

Or

maybe the excitement has gone out of your faith

and you find yourself merely going through the motions.

Maybe you are just sitting in the dark like Eli,

waiting for the light of God to go out in your life?

Or,

maybe you're more like Samuel, not really sure of your faith,

just beginning to hear the whispered demands

of an all encompassing love.

Then again,

perhaps you are a Nathanael,

a true son of Israel, wrestling with the angels of scepticism.

Not quite ready to believe, but intrigued none the less.

Watching closely and waiting for the right time to engage.

The truth is that on any given Sunday we are all here,

the Philips and Nathanaels,

the Elis and Samuels.

We all meet here and are met by God's vitalizing presence.

If you come as a Philip, God finds a way to lead you to a Nathanael.

And when you come as a Nathanael, God sends you a Philip.

If you come as an Eli, out of nowhere God drops a Samuel in your lap.

And when you come as a Samuel, God directs you to an Eli in need.

That is the true power of community.

But are we open to God's possibilities?

Are we ready to be taken, blessed, broken open and offered to those around us.

Do you remember back in the depth of the pandemic

when we could only meet through the magic of Zoom

and we couldn't take communion on a regular basis?

Though it took a while to realize it,

we found a deep truth;

and we found it the hard way.

Communion is more than something we do.

It is something we are!

We are the bread.

The bread to be taken,

blessed,

broken open

and offered to the world.

What if this just another part of what it means

to be the body of Christ in the world.

A part we had forgotten?

What if we are the Eucharist?

What if this is how God needs us today?

What if this is what it means to be true followers of the way

in this day and in this time?

What would that look like for us?

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

Amen!