

I Samuel 3: 1-20
Psalm 139: 1-12
John 1: 43-51

Found and Found Out
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Some children like sleeping in a perfectly dark room, all alone. A perfectly dark room has no shadows, nothing to see. Dark, quiet, safe, just right for that gradual slide into slumber. But, as you know, many children (and some adults) would much prefer to have a night light, and maybe someone else in the room. That little bit of light can give a feeling of security, an orientation in space, a sense of not being alone and lost.

Our story from the Hebrew tradition tells us about a little boy, Samuel, who has been serving in a temple with the old priest Eli since he was 3 years old. He is learning the ropes, so to speak: the expectation is that he will grow up to tend the temple himself, offering sacrifices to God and mediating the will of God to the people. But all is not well in Israel. We had learned in the chapter before that Eli's sons were corrupt and grasping, abusing their institutional religious standing. We learn at the beginning of our reading that Eli's "eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see," not a medical observation but a spiritual one. We learn that "the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread": a spiritual diagnosis for a whole nation. The world was out of whack. And young Samuel goes to sleep in the Temple of God, close to the Ark of God, as close to the center of holiness as one could be. It says that "the lamp of God had not yet gone out." There was something still possible. A night light still shone in the darkness of a world in disarray. There, with a 12 year old boy and a blind and ancient priest, revelation was still possible.

We are two weeks into the season of Epiphany, which falls between the two great Christian celebrations of Christmas and Easter. And, as it happens we are here on the day before the birthday of one of our American saints, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Epiphany is about revelation, specifically about who Jesus is and what that means. During this season, we recognize that neither the manger nor the cross tells the whole story. We read stories that tell us about Jesus through his life and mission and interactions with his friends and enemies. We put the manger and the cross into a context, which must speak to us today. And on this weekend, we put the life of Martin Luther King into a contemporary context as well. We say that, in spite of a world in disarray, a night light is still shining and revelation is still possible.

Epiphany is not merely a historical journey of discovery about Jesus or Samuel or Martin. It is also a voyage of self-discovery, hopefully a transforming and empowering voyage. We are not observers of Jesus; we are followers. And in that journey of following Jesus we learn that to be human is to be loved by God, that human lives matter, that in fact we are created, known, loved and **called** by God. We may have felt that we were lost in the dark, but we are definitely found.

We might have mixed feelings, as many people before us did, about the way that God seems to reach into our lives, unasked for. Samuel did not go to bed that night, praying for the voice of God to wake him up. He was probably not happy to get the message that his old teacher was about

to receive divine punishment. He was certainly not happy to deliver the message the next morning. For the rest of his life, Samuel carried the responsibility of being created and known and loved and **called** by God. Not an easy life, to be sure.

The Psalmist gives us a poetic prayer about being in this close relationship with divine presence. Once again, we may have mixed feelings about that rhetorical question: “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” I like to call this The Runaway Bunny Psalm, because it reminds me of the popular children’s book by Margaret Wise Brown. In this simple children’s story, the baby bunny banters with his mother about his plans to run away, but finds that his mother will always be there too. The inescapable tenderness of God puts us in a position of continually being found, continually being loved as we are, and continually invited to discover our purpose as those who are “fearfully and wonderfully made,” as verse 14 (not read earlier) says.

Like Samuel, Jesus was born into a time of moral disarray, political upheaval, and corrupt leadership. But, as we hear at the very beginning of John’s Gospel, the lamp of the Lord had not yet gone out: light still shone in the darkness. In this Gospel we get no Christmas story, no birth narrative – just the adult Jesus with enigmatic encounters and speeches that reveal something of God, something of Jesus, something of the role human beings can play in living as those loved and found by God. Jesus’ ministry begins with calling disciples, who seem struck by this person in John the Baptist’s company, and who then go off to others, saying “Come and see! We have found the one we have been waiting for.” A chain of people who respond to the light in Jesus: Phillip, then Andrew, then Simon, then Nathaniel. The skeptical Nathaniel, who asks Jesus in wonder, “Where did you get to know me?” Echoes of Psalm 139. Nathaniel has been found and found out for who he really is. The skeptic has an epiphany, sees the light, and is assured, “You will see greater things than these.”

One only has to open the newspapers or listen to the news to know that all is not well in our world. Disagreements about morality and ethics, divisions between races and religions, violence and corruption in the name of God: all these things seem to highlight failures in human society and human nature. But in communities of faith all over the world, another word is spoken: the lamp of the Lord has not yet gone out. The word of God may be rare, but it is still audible to some. Visions may not be widespread, but some may have cleared their eyes to see.

Where are the Samuels of today? And for that matter, where are the Eli’s who are brave enough to insist on hearing God’s word, painful as it may be? Where are the Martin Luther King Jr.’s of today? When we think back to 1955, when a young man emerged from the crowd around Rosa Parks to become the preacher to a nation in turmoil, we wonder, “Can that happen, even today?” Is there still a possibility that locally, nationally, internationally, a singular prophetic voice can capture our imaginations, give us an epiphany, change our history?

I have to admit that a prophet of that magnitude has not come to my attention. Instead, I see small groups coalesce. And I think, maybe God speaks first through these twos and threes and tens of people, until history reveals a leader. Often, it takes a community to discern the voice of God in our lives. Eli counseled young Samuel to listen to the voice in the night, and a prophet emerged. Phillip went to his friends and said “Come and see,” and a ministry began. Rosa Parks, who had been working for the NAACP for years before she made her stand on a Montgomery bus, worked with Ralph Abernathy and E.D. Nixon to select Martin Luther King Jr. as the leader of the history-

making boycott. Today, we have pictures of world statesmen and women, not standing individually at a podium, but walking with arms linked in a line together down the streets of Paris in solidarity with murdered journalists. For that moment, anyway, they could coalesce to name evil.

We can find quiet leaders if we try, but they might not look the way we expect. They might look like Lassana Bathily, a Malian Muslim who saved the lives of over a dozen people during the hostage standoff at a kosher market following the Charlie Hebdo. Bathily, who said, "Yes, I aided Jews. We're brothers. It's not a question of Jews, Christians, or Muslims. We're all in the same boat. We need to help each other to get out of this crisis." So the voice of God comes to us. A light shines and gives us a glimmer of hope, a way forward.

Today we remember and honor prophets who speak and act in ways of love, justice and peace. We remember that each of us has a calling from God, known and loved and **called** as we are in all our strength and weakness. We remember that we need to nurture the calls of others, especially the young. We remember that we are wonderfully and fearfully made as individuals, but "we are all in the same boat and we need each other. We have been found and found out for who we are. Let us live out of that gift.

I close with a Jewish parable from Martin Buber:

A rabbi named Zusya died and went to stand before the judgment seat of God. As he waited for God to appear, he grew nervous thinking about his life and how little he had done. He began to imagine that God was going to ask him, "Why weren't you Moses or why weren't you Solomon or why weren't you David?" But when God appeared, the rabbi was surprised. God simply asked, "Why weren't you Zusya?" In other words, "stop trying to be Moses, and start being the Zusya God created you to be?"

Amen.