

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sometimes it takes a while for us to settle into the service. Even more so now...when we are exclusively “on line”, “live streaming”...staying at home. We can be pre-occupied, even when we are all together in the sanctuary. But now...it is even easier to be Distracted.

Simple stuff can cause it. Our attention can easily be called away to something, anything else beside worship. We can be distracted by any of a million things outside that occupy our attention and, as a result, the service sneaks by. The readings are over and done with, with barely minimal attention. The clock ticks through the sermon. We put in our hour, more or less.

Later, while returning to all the thoughts and things that occupy our lives, and taking a breath in some quiet moment of reflection or contemplation, we can wonder why God is so distant.

Our faith gets measured in our patience waiting for God to show up.

Is this something new? Of course not.

There is a depressing familiarity about the first days of the year, that there is indeed ‘nothing new under the sun’. Our headlines are full of events, even more so right now, with topics that are anything but normal: life threatening pandemic coming into our very homes, schools, and workplaces; domestic political strife and confrontations that, in 2021, seemingly are unbelievable nightmares. Globally, continuing problems in chronically troubled regions of the world...nothing much new there...and all the other world events that greet us each day seem to be very much business as usual, with a tired old world spinning endlessly, one more time...

We hear and see the same thing in our scripture readings today. In the Old Testament reading, it was a time of spiritual famine, a time when people seemed only to reach God’s voice mail or answering machine. In other words, people groped in the dark, and they lacked direction. I dare you to tell me THAT does not sound familiar in our own times....

We are told that the sight of the old priest, Eli, was dim and failing, which in this context was not just a condition of the retina but is a metaphor for the state of his soul. The religion of Israel had run out of gas, and God had not spoken much to the people lately.

So, the story is noteworthy in part because both Samuel and Eli are slow to figure out what is going on when God calls to Samuel by name. The boy thinks it is the old priest, Eli, while Eli, for his part, thinks the kid is having bad dreams. They are slow, not just from waking up, but also because when awake, they live in distracted times. Yet, God calls anyway....and it is God who waits for them to wake up.

The gospel presents the same picture. A picture of surprised encounter in a way, or from a person, or from a place which is not expected. Philip is far more direct, in that he runs in, waving his arms and

shouts to his friend, essentially, “You will never guess who I met? The one named “God with us” in the scriptures, and he is from Nazareth!” And Nathanael answers in a sneer, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

In biblical times, Nazareth was a dark place. There were rebellions and uprisings against the Romans in that area. One occurred in Sepphoris, just a few miles north of Nazareth, and the Roman response was to burn the village and enslave its inhabitants. We do not know what happened to tiny Nazareth just four miles away, but we do know that at a place called Gerasa, also in the Gospel story, the Romans killed a thousand who could not flee, raped the women, plundered property, and then burn everything, before moving on to surrounding villages. It was said of the Romans ‘they make a desert and call it peace.’

Is this something new? No, it is not.

Then...and now...something new does not arrive until we allow it to be so.

I am afraid to label it as a **calling**, for that word has a connotation of implying someone or something special, or extraordinary. Almost all of us have had jobs at one point or another, to the point that connecting any one person with any specific job is the most ordinary thing in the world. A career, of course, occurs when a person undertakes a series of jobs over time. A career carries a sense of increasing experience, and often greater responsibility and reward, but it is still so commonplace as to be relatively ordinary, and within our general comfort zone of understanding.

But a calling? That is different...isn't it?

It appears that God does not think so. In these readings, God “calls” upon ordinary, common folks like you and I. Even with some difficulty, they recognize it. One is a boy...the one who is not the older experienced rabbi. The other is a smart aleck. There is no attempt to whitewash the resumes of these people. Despite our stained-glass windows, we encounter them as real people, warts and all. How could God choose people who demonstrate the same failings we meet in human beings in our daily lives? How could Jesus choose us? Can anything good come out of Rome, New York?

Notice the response of Philip to the Nathanael’s challenging question about good coming from Nazareth. Did he engage in a debate with him, attempting to “evangelize” Nathanael with his logic or reason? That stuff smacks of saying in effect, “Here is Jesus over here. If you change your life and see him the way that we see him, you are all set and can be one of us.” No, instead Nathanael replies simply, “Come and see”. In other words, talk is cheap, so I will leave it to God to make up your mind for yourself.

Jesus, or “God with us”, answers Nathanael with the story of Jacob’s dream of wrestling with an angel and seeing angels ascending and descending. To a faithful Jew, the story of Jacob is one of redemption and calling, of God reaching into a human life in a transforming way. The word “Bethel” means “place of God”. In our baptism, we also encountered the living God. Somebody similar to Philip cared enough about us to bring us to the place where God is, our Bethel. In our baptism, “God with us” looked into us to be the person he was calling, and like the disciples, like Nathanael, we had the potential to be the

sort of person Jesus calls to be his intimate followers.

We are...all of us...already called. We are reminded, at the point of the service of absolution, that we are already, now, “in eternal life.” We are forgiven our sins by God so that we may remain in eternal life. When we open ourselves to the manifestation of “God with us”, we encounter the transformative power of God to make us a changed people....just like Nathanael was looked into.

We are coming into the time of our annual meeting, it is in my joyful heart to proclaim that this parish is getting it. We know, somehow and in someways, despite the distractions of the world around us, that God sees our potential, our prejudices, our talents, our sins....and chooses us. Calls us, as Samuel and Nathanael, and countless other faithful others have been, and will be called.

If the Messiah, if “God with us” can come from the backwaters of Nazareth, anyone can live in Jesus as he lives in us. We are called to be Samuels and Nathanaels, called to engage people in our century, where and as they are by becoming the presence of Jesus as we touch life where we find it.

All in thanksgiving and praise to the living God, source of all life and goodness, and manifest to us in the loving relationship between the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.