

Second Sunday after the Epiphany
1 Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139; John 14:3-51

January 15, 2012
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Note: I have heard today's readings against the backdrop of an article by Jeffrey Gettleman in Friday's New York Times about South Sudan.* Following the country's independence from the north six months ago, ethnic and economic tensions have erupted again into a cycle of intertribal violence and revenge. One tribe has declared its intention to wipe out an entire neighboring tribe. "We mean what we say," says one leader. "We kill everybody. We are tired of them."

We are tired of them.

*You have searched me out and known me . . ."
my sitting and my rising
all my thoughts
my journeys and my resting places
all my ways
every word on my lips.*

I am known. You are known. We are known, each and all who ever have lived and ever will live.

Knit together in the womb by the One who made us.

There is no place we could go and no time in our life where God is not with us, in darkness or light, in life or death.

It has ever been so and always will be.

That we would live in this deepest relationship of love and favor is the deepest desire of the human heart and soul. We are hungry for this intimacy with God. We are made for it.

And yet . . . the time of the priesthood of Eli is a time of darkness. "The word of the Lord was rare in those days." There is not much awareness of God's purpose or action among the people. The times are bleak and uncertain. Leadership is self-interested, leaders' concern for themselves trumps any concern for the good of the common man, woman and child. (This all sounds sadly familiar.)

Eli was Israel's priest, in the family of priests appointed by God at Sinai. His sons are heirs to his authority. But, they "were worthless men," we are told; "they did not know the Lord..)" (1 Samuel 2:12). Not that they had not heard of the Lord, of course; or that they were not familiar with what the Lord required of the people and especially their leaders. But they really did not care, "they had no regard for the Lord" (R.S.V.). Their concern was for their own advantage and power.

Sadly familiar, indeed. Sadly human, as we look around our world today, dark and bleak. We repeat in our time the same old story of alienation from God lived out in alienation from our neighbors and ourselves.

In Eli's sons, the story takes the form of greed, strong arming the people when they bring meat for the temple sacrifices. They demand that it be given over "for the priest" before it can be properly

offered. Earlier, the warning has come to Eli from God, you are “fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel.” (1 Sam. 2:29)

More than this, the sons of Eli lie with the young women who serve the temple, as if the Lord were a fertility god, like Baal (2:12-17, 22). When Eli admonishes his sons, they will not listen. And so, the Lord is finished with them and their ways.

The call of Samuel is often heard as a lovely story. How nice that God calls to this special boy, given to the service of God in the temple by his mother Hannah. How inspiring that with the guidance of the old priest he answers, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” We might end the reading there, as the brackets in the lectionary invite us to do. But that is not the whole story.

To paraphrase David, from last week: how disturbing that the same Lord who in the beginning creates order out of chaos also creates chaos out of our order. The Lord steps into Israel’s history here to shake things up. The Lord rattles the old, tolerated order—that was, in reality, dis-ordered and corrupt—for something new to come into being.

And it does, in and through Samuel, the Lord’s trustworthy prophet. To and through Samuel the Lord continues to reveal himself, to know and be known, as God intends for all people.

But the shake-up, the intervention, the disturbance is not final. It does not last. God does not catch history and human behavior in a freeze-frame and hold it there. Israel and her leaders go on to fall away again, into lack of compassion for the weak, and self-seeking instead of God- and neighbor-seeking.

We might despair over this, especially as we see the same pattern so widespread today. But here’s the thing: there is more to see and hear in our story from the book Samuel. There is another pattern here that calls us to hope. It is the pattern of God.

Though it is night, though the word of the Lord was rare and visions were not widespread, the lamp of God has not gone out. There is an echo, perhaps, of Psalm 139. Though we so often are caught up in darkness, “Darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day; darkness and light to you are both alike.” And, from the Prologue of John, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Though Eli’s eyesight is so dim that he cannot see, though he cannot control his own sons, he has enough knowledge of God and enough insight that he is able to be a guide for Samuel, who does not yet know the Lord. When he hears what the Lord has told Samuel, he accepts it: “It is the Lord.”

Perhaps he even welcomes this word that means death for him and his sons, and the end of his line. It is a release, a solution to his own helplessness *vis a vis* his sons; it means better times for his people. It is God’s solution to a state of dis-order, God’s way of drawing close to a people who could not find their own way back to God. In this case, through a boy named Samuel, whose name means “God has heard.” As if God hears the longing of our hearts even when we do not know and cannot name it for ourselves.

In all of history, God has never stopped seeking us and drawing close. We see and know God at work, still, in the prophets of our own time. Prophets like Martin Luther King, who preached and organized for an end to racial injustice; who, in his later days, preached and marched for an end to war, and for fair pay and working conditions for sanitation workers in Memphis.

God is at work in those who are advocates for the rights and welfare of persons with disabilities, and those of all women and children.

In the movement to end the effects of extreme poverty, in our lifetime.

In the Occupy Wall Street movement that protests the increasingly extreme economic disparities in this country.

In the Arab Spring, and all movements seeking freedom from tyranny.

None of our human words or actions are perfect, lasting, or universally effective in changing relationships and powers that are dis-ordered. None of them can be. We are only human. But God is present and active in all our efforts to increase compassion and respect for the dignity of every human being. It is God who knit that dignity into each and every human being, and who most wonderfully restored the dignity of human nature in Jesus Christ.

When Philip went to find Nathanael, he said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

What Philip told Nathanael was not strictly true. It was Jesus who found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” But for Philip, the presence of Jesus was so powerful, so intimate and all-encompassing that it was as if he, Philip, really had found the one he had been seeking all his life.

We hear something like this reflected in Nathanael’s words—Nathanael, whose name means “God has given.” Nathanael recognizes what the psalmist sings: that he is known, sought, treasured through and through, in every fiber of his being.

This is how God knows and treasures you, and every human being, of whatever tribe or people, whatever age or gender, color, sexual orientation, religion. Each one is known and infinitely precious to the One who made us and the One who shows us the Father. All so that we might see, know and respect one another for who we really are: one people, made of one blood; one people who belong to God and each other.

* Jeffrey Gettleman, *The New York Times*, January 13, 2012, pp. A-1, 8.