

## **“What Do You See?”**

January 17, 2021

*(All credit goes to  
Rev. Debie Thomas  
who sees very well.)*

Scripture

1 Samuel 3:1-20

### **The LORD Calls Samuel**

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.

One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place.

The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

Then the LORD called Samuel.

Samuel answered, “Here I am.”

And he ran to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.”

But Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.” So, he went and lay down.

Again, the LORD called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.”

“My son,” Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.”

Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

A third time the LORD called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.”

Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy.

So, Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So, Samuel went and lay down in his place.

The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

And the LORD said to Samuel: "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. <sup>12</sup> At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end.

For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God, and he failed to restrain them.

Therefore, I swore to the house of Eli, 'The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.'"

Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the LORD. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision,

but Eli called him and said, "Samuel, my son."

Samuel answered, "Here I am."

"What was it he said to you?" Eli asked. "Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you."

So, Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, "He is the LORD; let him do what is good in his eyes."

The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground.

And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD.

Gospel  
John 1:43-51

### **Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael**

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida.

Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked.

"Come and see," said Philip.

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."

Jesus said, "You believe, because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that."

He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man."

I have struggled to write a sermon this week. Sitting at my desk a week after a violent, seditious mob stormed the U.S Capitol Building at the incitement of America's sitting president, I confess that returning to "business as usual" is difficult.

I expect like many of you, I am heartbroken. On the one hand, I can't believe what my eyes watched on my television screen. On the other hand,

I know full well that what happened in Washington, D.C was a predictable outcome of a long and reckless disregard for the truth. This is what happens when we desecrate reality. This is what happens when we worship falsehood for our own convenience and gain.

People say we live in a post-truth society— as if “post-truth” is necessary for our survival, going forward. But the fact is, it matters what our eyes see. It matters what we apprehend as the real, the genuine, and the faithful. When truth dies, people die, too.

Our readings for the second Sunday after the Epiphany are all about seeing. In the book of 1st Samuel, we encounter the priest, Eli, whose physical and spiritual eyesight has grown so dim, he cannot see what’s right in front of him.

In the gospel of John, Jesus sees Nathanael— sees into his heart, sees who he is and what he needs— under a fig tree, prompting Nathanael, the skeptic, to look past his stereotypes, and see Jesus for who he really is: The Son of God.

After Wednesday’s events, two verses jump out to me:

From the Old Testament reading: “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” And the second from John’s Gospel: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

I’m drawn to these lines right now because they echo my own anxieties. I have wondered this week if we— like Eli— live in an age when “the word of the Lord is rare,” and transformative “visions” of God’s just and loving kingdom are not widespread. As I watch violence and hatred erupt in my nation’s capital, I fear that nothing good, redemptive, and just can ever come from this brokenness.

But of course, this isn’t true. As Christians, we believe in a God who never stops speaking to us. A God who longs to give love, mercy, healing, and hope. And we trust that God can indeed restore and resurrect life.

And there is no place, time, circumstance, or situation that is beyond God’s ability to redeem.

Can anything good come out of last Wednesday’s atrocities? Can anything good come out of America’s endangered democracy? Yes. That is the hope we cling to. The hope we must offer to the world at this critical time.

But here is the thing - saying yes to God requires us to see. Really see.

It requires us to follow the truth wherever it leads— even when the truth hurts. It requires us to listen and to speak prophetically. It requires us to

challenge our assumptions about God and faith, so that we can find the sacred in unexpected and even scandalous places.

In our story from the Hebrew Bible, we meet a priest named Eli who no longer expects to see or hear anything from God. Not because God has abandoned him, but because he can't find the courage, will, and moral fortitude to do what God speaks. Eli's sons are also priests, but they are priests who have lost their way. Priests who have made a habit of dishonoring God through extortion, greed, and sexual sin.

When Eli fails to restrain his sons, God turns to the boy, Samuel. A child on the periphery. A child whose sight and hearing are not yet compromised by the political interests and conspiracies of his elders. A child who will tolerate an unfamiliar voice and an uncomfortable message.

I've heard and preached many sermons about how Samuel learns to listen for God. But Debie Thomas insists that I pay attention to the profoundly disconcerting truth that God says to Samuel afterwards. Think about it.

God calls on Samuel to prophesy the fall of the house of Eli. Meaning, God tells Samuel to name corruption in his own religious home. To call sin out for what it is, even if that seeing and speaking topples the institution that he trusts.

Thomas asks: What would it look like for us to do the same in this difficult cultural moment? What does truth look like now, and where and how are we being called to speak it?

The most disturbing images I saw during the attack were images of mobsters carrying Christian signs and symbols into the Capitol Building. "Jesus Saves.", "God, Guns & Guts Made America, let's keep all three."

I am tempted, like many "progressive" Christians, to simply disavow such images, and move on as if they have nothing to do with me.

But maybe we ought to ask harder and more painful set of questions? Questions like:

Has the church in America failed its prophetic duty to represent the Jesus of love, mercy, hope, and restorative justice in the public square, that we've allowed Christianity to be co-opted in violent, hateful ways that must grieve the heart of God?

Where are the blind spots in our theology that allow white supremacy, bigotry, nativism, and populism to go unchecked?

Are we enamored of power? Of proximity to power? Of approval from the powers?

Have we allowed our privilege individualism piety to be more important than communal responsibility, and we spend more time agonizing over what we believe about God's grace, than we do embodying that grace outside our church doors?

Epiphany is a season of light and revelation, a season of searching, discovering, finding, and knowing and seeing.

I do wonder, what if Jesus were here right now, looking at what we're looking at, what would he see?

In John's Gospel, we encounter a skeptic named Nathanael who thinks he knows exactly who God is and how God operates.

God's Messiah, he is sure, can't possibly come from a backwater town like Nazareth. Nazareth isn't good enough for the divine.

The lectionary begins with Jesus going to Galilee, finding Philip, and inviting him to "follow me." Philip accepts the call without hesitation, and then, brimming with excitement, runs off to find his friend, Nathanael. He finds him sitting under a fig tree. "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth!" Philip tells Nathanael. But his friend under the fig tree isn't impressed; his religious assumptions won't allow him to see anything fresh or surprising in a simple carpenter from the wrong side of the tracks.

Instead of arguing with Nathanael, though, Philip simply tells his doubtful friend to "come and see."

Nathanael does so and receives the shock of his life. As soon as he and Jesus see each other, before they exchange a single word, Jesus says, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" And "I saw you under the fig tree."

Immediately, Nathanael moves from doubt to faith, from ignorance to knowledge. He experiences an epiphany.

But this story is finally not about what Nathanael sees; it's about what Jesus sees. It's a story about Jesus's way of looking and seeing, and about what becomes possible when we dare to experience his gaze.

In this story, what makes salvation possible is not what Nathanael sees in Jesus, but what Jesus sees in Nathanael.

Seeing is always selective. We always have choices when it comes to what we see, what we prioritize, what we name, and what we call out in each other. The selves we present to the world are layered and messy, and it takes a lot of love and patience to see and figure out what really lies at the core of who we are. But there is great power in that patient and gracious seeing.

There is something healing, something holy, something life-changing when we are deeply seen, known, named, and accepted.

I think Jesus had a choice when it came to seeing Nathanael. What would have happened if, instead of calling out Nathanael's purity of heart, Jesus said, "Here is a cynic who is stunted by doubt," or "Here is a man who is governed by prejudice," or, "Here is a man who is blunt and careless in his words," or, "Here is a man who sits around, passive and noncommittal, waiting for life to happen to him."

Any one of those things might have been true of Nathanael. But Jesus looked past them to see an honesty, an innocence, a purity of thought and intention that made up who Nathanael's was really.

Maybe the other qualities were there as well, but would Nathanael's heart melted in wonder and joy if Jesus saw and named those first? Or would Nathanael have withdrawn in shame, fear, despair, and embarrassment?

Jesus named the quality he wanted to bless and inspire in his would-be follower, the quality that made Nathanael a person of beauty, an image-bearer of God.

Is it possible for us - to see our present moment as Jesus sees it? Instead of deciding that we know everything there is to know about the political "others" in our lives, can we ask God for fresh vision? Instead of assuming that "nothing good" can come of the cultural mess we find ourselves in, can we accept Philip's invitation to "come and see?"

What would happen if we left our comfortable vantage points, and dared to believe that just maybe, we have been limited and hasty in our original certainties about each other, about God, and about the world?

To "come and see" is to approach all of life with a grace-filled curiosity, to believe that we are holy mysteries to each other, worthy of further exploration. To come and see is to enter into the joy of being deeply seen and deeply known, and to have the very best that lies hidden within us called out and called forth.

I write these words in hope. In fragile hope, but hope, nonetheless. Not because we're capable of clear vision on our own, but because we are held

by the eternal promise of Jesus who said: "You will see greater things than these."

We will. We will see heaven open. We will see angels. We will see the love and justice of God. So, don't be afraid. Don't hide. Don't despair. Live boldly into the calling of Epiphany.

See. Name. Speak. Bless.

God is near and God is speaking. Many good things can come out of Nazareth.