

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

January 18, 2009

Epiphany 2B 2009

In the name of our one living, ever-beckoning God: Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's lessons are about callings. They invite us to take an adventure in spiritual awareness. They also point out the relationship between our knowledge and experience of God and our own self-awareness. They are stories about identity and growth.

The story about God's call to Samuel is one of my favorites and is often read at ordinations. Those of you familiar with the story may recall that Samuel's mother, Hannah, prayed and sobbed at the shrine at Shiloh where Eli was the priest beseeching God to give her a son, promising God that she would present him to the God as a Nazarite to serve God all his life. Following Samuel's birth, she brought him as a young child to Eli to serve God under his tutelage. Now, as a young boy, Samuel, sleeping in the room containing the Ark of the Covenant, hears God's call – "Samuel, Samuel". Thinking it is Eli calling, the young lad awakens the sleeping Eli, who sends him back to bed. Again this happens: "Samuel, Samuel". The third time Eli recognizes that it is the Lord calling to Eli. In our journeys to maturity we need to be taught about God and God's workings just like anything else. Eli acts as Samuel's spiritual mentor, telling him what to do the next time this happens – to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening". Samuel's life journey now begins. Samuel's self-awareness is rooted in his knowledge and experience of God.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once quoted an old African saying, "I am because we are." It tells a universal reality – that we get our identities, our sense of self-awareness from our environments – our families, our communities, our schools, our jobs and

workplaces, etc. Our spiritual and religious connections also are there. Whether or not God is there and how God is imaged have important consequences for our self-images.

Did you notice that it was God who is the initiator here? God knew and called Samuel by name. That is true in all the calls to prophets in the Bible. It's the Bible's way of expressing a great truth – that our true identity, our true self-recognition is found in God's knowledge of us.

Today's psalm, Psalm 139, is one of the most poetic expressions of this truth in the Bible. The psalmist is poetic in his description of the wonder and joy he experiences when he realizes that he is known by an interactive God, a God who views him as a subject and not an object, a God who is seeking relationship. The psalmist's realization that the Creator has "searched him out and known him" leads to the realization that he is "Fearfully and wonderfully made." If the psalmist were a young person living today, he would describe his recognition of God's work manifest in himself and God's continued relationship with him as "Dude, that's awesome!" "Dude, that just blows all my circuits" would be a good contemporary rendition of the Psalmist's discovery of his intrinsic self-worth - "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me."

Today's Gospel lesson is another call story. Again, notice that it is Jesus who takes the initiative in calling disciples. He "found Philip" and called him to "follow me". When Philip tells Nathaniel that he has found the one foretold by Moses and the prophets – Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth, Nathaniel skeptically replies "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Apparently Nazareth had a reputation as being inconsequential.) Philip, now a disciple, is the one who extends the invitation, "Come and see." Nathaniel's belief in Jesus is based on his realization that, like the psalmist,

he is foreknown by Jesus to the depths of his being. As Jesus notes, Nathaniel's faith is the start of a spiritual adventure.

So what about us? What relevance does this have for us now? I think we live in an age, at least in the developed Western world, where many have lost that sense of wonder. Many view the world and, sadly, themselves and others materialistically – as external objects. Many have lost the sense of wonder and awe and the presence of God in ourselves and in the ordinary world. Even many Christians have lost the sense that our true self-awareness arises out of our real experience and knowledge of God in our own lives and times. The Bible, especially one's own interpretations of it, is viewed as the end and being of all rather than the history of people's spiritual journey and self-realization and an invitation and guide to our own.

We are called to be disciples – to live in Christ and reach out to all in the world. To be effective we have to know our true selves as God knows us. If we can grow in seeing the wonder of ourselves and the world around us, the only appropriate response, according to Albert Schweitzer, is a reverence for life that leads to kindness, healing and transformation. In other words, inner-awareness leads to outer awareness and mission.

How do we do this? According to the spiritual guide and psychiatrist Gerald May it is an interweaving of *pausing, noticing, opening ourselves to the new, stretching, yielding and responding*. To do this we have to be willing to live in the present and to listen with our hearts.

It is especially important to reflect on this process as we prepare to inaugurate a new President and Vice-President and start a new chapter in our nation's history. Do we reach out to the world in loving thanks to our Creator or out of self-interest?

As wonderful as we are, we are not perfect. Too much certainty about ourselves and our beliefs can be as dangerous as not having any. Too many in the world, and

indeed even in the Church, we judge others according to their knowledge and beliefs about the other without recognizing that God understands us better than we understand ourselves – let alone others. The lectionary leaves out a part of Psalm 139 that I think is essential to our spiritual development. The Psalmist, assured of the wonder of his being and God’s knowledge of him, goes on to petition the Lord to “slay the wicked, those who speak spitefully against you.” He assures God that he “hates those who hate you. I hate them with a perfect hatred.”

Where does that violent language fit in? It shocks me, but it is truthful. All of us have shadows, perhaps even a dark side. It seems to be part of our nature. The violence and mayhem arise when this goes unchecked; when we believe that we know God as well as God knows us.

A large part of the spiritual journey is to pause, as the Psalmist does, to reflect and accept that we might be wrong; to have the humility of doubt and know the need for guidance. The psalm ends with these words:

Search me out, O God, and know my heart;

Try me and know my restless thoughts.

Look well whether there be any wickedness in me

And lead me in the way that is everlasting.

AMEN.