

Second Sunday after Epiphany (Baptism)

January 14, 2018

Church of the Advent

### **Known and Called**

Like gifts from the Magi, this morning our scripture stories have brought us some precious light to shine on this season of Epiphany. These simple bible stories are about simple characters who experienced an encounter with God, and though they at first are doubtful and skeptical at what they saw and heard with their own eyes and ears, they came to understand that God *saw them*, and *knew them*, and *called them*—as unique, and important, and beloved.

The first story from the Old Testament is set in a time when the Israelites had been moving from the security of their promised land to the loss of it. They had been led by generations of Judges, but they clamored for a King, so they could be as powerful and respected as they imagined their enemies to be. The boy Samuel had been living in the temple with his mentor, the prophet Eli. Samuel's mother Hannah had been barren, and had prayed to God for a child, promising that she would offer the baby back to God after it was weaned. When her prayer was answered she was true to her word, and she took her small child Samuel to the temple to spend the rest of his life in God's service. One night, as Samuel was trying to sleep, he heard someone calling his name—Samuel, Samuel! At first he thought he was being summoned by Eli and went into his master's room repeatedly to see what he wanted. Eventually, Eli understood that it must be God who was calling Samuel, and he encouraged the boy to pay attention to the voice and what it was asking of him. Samuel then summoned up his courage and to answer, *Here I am*.

What happens in the rest of the story is that God gave Samuel the bad news that the priestly house of Eli was about to come tumbling down—because Eli's sons had done some bad things—and though Samuel was at first reluctant to be the bearer of bad news, eventually he spat it out. Because the Lord was with Samuel and “let none of his words fall to the ground,” that faithful little boy grew up to become known as a trustworthy prophet and Judge in the Kingdom of Israel—later being the one to anoint both Saul and David as the Kings who came after him. God knew Samuel before he was even born, knew him as a child, and knew him called him and remained with him throughout his

challenging life as a prophet to Kings who did not always appreciate and welcome the messages from God that he had been sent to deliver.

Our second story comes early in the Gospel of John after Jesus had been baptized by John the Baptist, and had returned to his home country of Galilee to begin recruiting his disciples. From the area of Bethsaida, where he had called Andrew and Peter, Jesus called Philip to follow him. Then Philip brought around his friend Nathanael (who is identified in the other three Gospels as Bartholomew) who came reluctantly, with a prejudiced negative opinion of Nazareth, and anyone who came from there. Nathanael was likely one of many who had been waiting for the Messiah—the Anointed One—but expecting him to come into the world to save God’s people from oppression and sin from a place of status and power—a warrior or a holy man from a ruling or priestly class of people. Humans had always followed leaders who could be respected for their achievements, or education, or family pedigree, even though in Israel—as everywhere—human leaders inevitably disappoint. Nazareth was just a backwater place in the road, and would not be expected to produce someone Anointed of God; after all, even Samuel had been raised in the temple. Nathanael must have forgotten that King David had started out as a shepherd. In any case, Philip persuaded Nathanael to *come and see*, and when he did, he found Jesus acting like he already knew him. Before they could even be formally introduced, Jesus recognized Nathanael, and said something very complementary about him, that he was a very trustworthy sort. Nathanael responded with something like, “have we met?” The answer was very specific, helping Nathanael to understand that Jesus had not only known where he had been earlier that day—under a fig tree—but where he had been *all his life*. Nathanael had a personal experience of being *known*, really known to the depth of his being, and called out by the Son of God. He knew immediately that his friend Philip had been right: he was looking at and speaking to the new King of Israel. And he was a follower of Jesus from that moment on. Nathanael (Bartholomew) the disciple is recorded to have taken the Good News of Jesus to India and to Armenia, where he eventually died a martyr’s death.

So what we might ask, do these stories of being known and called have to do with us? Who are we that God would call out our names in the night? Would we, like Samuel, mistake God’s voice for someone in the next room? If we heard Jesus calling us out from under a fig tree, saying *hey you under there, follow me*, would we, like Nathanael, respond with something like, *have we met?* Or like from the scene in the film *Bruce Almighty*, if our pager kept beeping us with God’s phone number, urging us

to call back, would we throw it out the window like Jim Carey did, hoping it would get run over by a truck? (And if you have seen that movie you know that getting destroyed by a truck did not keep that smashed-up pager from beeping God's number—over and over.)

The gift for us in these stories is that they are about ordinary people— and yet each one in God's eyes was unique, important, beloved, and called to extraordinary things. And though we may not feel it most of the time, each one of us in God's eyes is unique, important, and beloved. God's voice is still speaking and moving through our lives—through our world, even on the days we have given up on the power of faith—and grace—to make a difference. God does not give up. God did not give up on his people in the time of Samuel, or in the time of Jesus, and God does not give up in our time. God searches us out and knows us—*our rising up and our sitting down, tracing our journeys and our resting places, acquainted with all our ways*. This is true for every one of us—receptive or resistant, attentive or distracted, blessed with many years of life or brand new—and that is an extraordinary thing. Whether we are called into leadership or supporting roles, into bold roles of resistance and change, or quiet roles of nurture and care, or strong roles of encouragement and invitation, summoning others to *come and see*, we are all called by God.

We are about to rise to sing and pray and baptize Webb Anderson McGinley, the newest person here with us this morning. Webb has already been living an adventurous life, carrying his parents and his larger family on a journey showered with challenges and blessings, and the abiding presence of God. Known from his mother's womb, as his little body was woven in the depths of the earth, God's eyes beheld him even before his was finished, and called him beloved. And God has called many others into Webb's life—many who have enfolded him and his family with skill and love and support and grace. Today, as this beautiful baby is brought forward to baptized in his grandfather's baptismal gown, we will acknowledge the special relationship between Webb and God, pledge to support it, and recall our own. We will say together the Baptismal Covenant, reminding us of the new life and light that has been part of us since our own baptisms. We will stand and offer God praise and thanks that we are unique, important, and beloved, and acknowledge that whomever we are, wherever we are, God is with us, calling our name. May our hearts be *so open* to the flood of grace in that voice, that we cannot help but answer, *here I am*. Amen.