

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)

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Advent Lutheran Church, Morgan Hill, CA

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Texts: John 1:43-51; I Samuel 3:1-10

## LISTEN, GOD IS CALLING

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." John 1:43-51 (NRSV)

Brothers and sisters, let us celebrate where the Spirit brings freedom. However you come politically to this week, as Americans, let us celebrate what has been done. We have not achieved racial equality in our time, but we have done as a country what some said could not be done in our time, in electing the first racial minority person as President of these United States. And the person elected is of African heritage, a heritage that has suffered the sorrowful legacy of slavery and a hard struggle for civil rights. Pete Jennings, who visited us last weekend, has a colleague in his doctoral program who mentors African-American youth in Tempe, Arizona. She reported to him that the week Barack Obama was elected, each one saw himself or herself in a new way.

God's Dream. God works, you know, most often in pretty natural ways, like Desmond Tutu says – sharing, loving, caring. Holding, playing, laughing (from the children's book God's Dream by Desmond Tutu and Douglas Carlton, illustrated by Leuyen Pham, just read to the children). God works most often in pretty natural ways. Like Jesus finding Philip and saying to him, "Follow me." Like Philip finding Nathaniel, and telling him about Jesus. And what did Nathaniel say? Can anything good come out of Nazareth? But Philip didn't give up. He said, "Come and see."

We can be like Philip – wanting to reach out and invite people to see Jesus. But maybe we get discouraged because we think they already have their mind made up, like Nathaniel seemed to have. We don't have to argue people into this life. Just invite, like Philip did – ask them to "Come and See."

Maybe you want to invite them to your church. Just do it. At Jim Carr's encouragement, we have had business cards printed up that say, "Be my guest at church this Sunday. Why? Because I love my church and I think you will, too! On the back is the church's information and service times. These cards will be available this week. But you don't need to wait for these cards to invite people. The next two Sundays I will be preaching on science and faith, issues that are often stumbling blocks for people as they consider faith. Invite them to come and see – the barriers are perhaps not as high as they may think.

God is at work in the church. And God is at work in history. Sometimes we can be like Nathaniel, though. He was so sure of his way of seeing things that he almost didn't get to be a part of it. He almost didn't follow Jesus just because Jesus was from Nazareth!

Sometimes we become so attached to certain ideas or ideologies that we cannot listen. Sometimes someone who calls herself a Democrat can no longer hear another possibility. Sometimes someone who calls himself a Republican only hears or listens to what confirms his positions. These are the best categories we have but we must admit that after all they are rather pedestrian categories. When God calls us, it is to live in freedom from the pedestrian categories in which we find ourselves. Oh, yes, God is involved in history – and God's transforming work in history is never conventional.

Eve and Adam became convinced it would be best if they knew everything – knowledge of all good and evil, so that they might have more control – and so they ate the fruit of that tree. But God called out to them: Listen! and made a promise to bring them back from the destructive path they and their descendents were on.

Abram lived a fine life among his people – and then God called to him: Listen! Leave your home and land and family and go to a new place I will show you. And through you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Moses was in the wilderness because he tried to fight the injustice of the oppression of the slaveholders in Egypt with violence of his own and God called out to him: Listen! Go speak my word to Pharaoh and lead my people out of slavery, into the land of their ancestors.

Young Samuel was serving in the place of worship in a time when the word of the Lord was rare. While he was sleeping, God called his name, insistently, waking him, Samuel! Samuel! Samuel! until he said, Speak, Lord. I'm listening.

The prophets spoke to a people of Israel and Judah proud to be God's people and said, Listen! God is not pleased with your worship where there is no justice in the

land. God requires you to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

When the people were driven from the land and defeated, the prophets spoke again, God's word: Thus says the Lord who made you... I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring.

When the people were in back the land but ruled by Roman law and temple law, God sent John the Baptizer who said, Listen! God is calling you to prepare a new way. Turn your life around, for a powerful one is coming.

When Jesus came, he said Listen! and taught them many things about the surprising kingdom of God that he was bringing. He died in the sight of strangers, because his followers mostly fled, and then rose from the dead and said to them, Now go, and make disciples... and I am with you always.

And then in the vision in the book of Revelation, God gave encouragement to remain faithful to Christ and said to the churches and the Christians living in an oppressive empire that kept peace through violence: Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

So Listen. What is God saying to us?

I believe that faith communities like ours are called to reach out to our friends and neighbors and family members, calling one another to come and listen to God's word and God's call. You and I are called to pray for one another and our leaders in the great challenges that surround us and lie before us; and to support one another in living a life of faith and hope.

For from what I can see, we are living in a time when all the systems are in distress. Finance. Employment. Education. Health care. Social services. We are as a society on an edge. This is a dangerous place, this edge we are on, and also an opening for new life. Can we leave the old arguments behind? Can we walk into a new way of living together that honors who we all are?

The world is changing right now and we do not know how any of this will turn out. But Listen, God is calling you to be a part of the transformation in history. You cannot do it with certainty, only with God and with faith in God's goodness will you have the courage to hope and to act. As Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you cannot see the whole staircase."

Faith is listening to how God might be calling you this week, and acting on it: Inviting someone to share a step in your faith journey; helping a friend or

neighbor; listening respectfully to another perspective just to learn without trying to convince the other that your way is better.

We have come to this moment in history because of those who in faith took the first step when they could not see the whole staircase. This fall, the rap artist Jay-Z, in speaking with his African-American community put it this way:

Rosa Parks sat so Martin Luther King could walk.

Martin Luther King walked so Obama could run.

Obama is running so we all can fly.

(Jay-Z in Cleveland, October 29, 2008)

Faith is refusing to give in to despair when things are so wrong we wonder if they will ever be put right. In our time, people are tempted to despair about peace in the Middle East, a place of conflict and a region that affects so much in people's and nation's attitudes toward one another. I have not known a long period of peace in the Middle East in my lifetime and do not even know what that looks like. But that does not mean it is impossible. That does not mean that we do not pray for this and that some will not be specially called to be present and work for this. 44 Lutheran bishops from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and in Canada just returned from the Holy Land, this week where they met with Israeli and Palestinian leaders. This trip had been planned for two years, and is happening now, when they could speak and listen with key leaders in an urgent time. While none can see the end, Faith is taking the first step even when you cannot see the whole staircase.

Some think that religion must always lead to war which leads to victory which leads to peace. This was the theology of Rome's empire, and it was incarnate in the dynasties of the Caesars. As John Dominic Crossan would say, The bumper sticker on the Roman chariots would be: Peace through Victory. Jesus and Paul taught a new way: a religion that leads to nonviolence that leads to justice that leads to peace. (Crossan, God and Empire.) The bumper sticker on the Christian's cart or fishing boat would be: Peace through Justice.

A reporter spoke to Bishop Rumalshah about the church's work in the Peshawar region of Northwest Pakistan, asking him, How do you serve as a Christian in a hostile region, where violence has become the norm, where the news for you is rarely encouraging, where you're held down economically, socially and politically? How do you incarnate Christ when you live *there*, in a dark night that does not seem to be ending?. A humble, gentle man with penetrating wisdom gained through difficult experiences and long suffering, Bishop Rumalshah responded with a question of his own. "Have you ever counted the tangible cost of loving your neighbor when he may be your enemy?" It's a question encountered daily at the various ministries of the diocese. "In our clinics near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, it's come one, come all," he said.

“We try to reenact God's love among the tribal groups. If Taliban come injured to one of our border clinics, we never ask them if they are Taliban. I'm not trying to romanticize them. It's chilling even to think about. But they show up. They are people, who in a way are very conscious of God. But the face of a suffering God is alien to them. Due to the demands of my faith, I cannot hate them. They know they will be offered healing for their wounds in a quiet, humble way. If they feel alienated from others in God's world, we are offering them a relationship that can end that alienation. We believe that a door should always be open to Christ. If you close that door, what are they going to do for Christian witness?”

Peace through justice. We haven't come to this point yet. Many people of faith have not seen that their calling is to cooperate with a nonviolent God. But faith calls us to live in hope in this world and not to despair or settle for another way. Augustine said, “God created you without you; God won't save you without you.” And in our time Desmond Tutu has said, “God without you will not; you without God cannot.” God's people must fully live within the promise. And we are to be a sign for the world, temples of the Holy Spirit, inviting others, and walking alongside them in the walk of faith. God is waiting for you to act in faith and in the Spirit of God. Listen, God is calling.