

Discipleship: A Two-Way Street; John 1:43-51 (Epiphany 2B)

Second Presbyterian Church

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Last week we read about Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist in the gospel of Mark. Baptism is a communal sacrament. It symbolizes that God is always with us as we seek to serve God, but God knows that we cannot serve on our own. Even Jesus was not expected to serve on his own. Through our baptism God promises to be with us in community. As Jesus begins his public ministry, the first thing he does is to gather those who will be partners in spreading the life-saving message that Jesus will bring. Listen to the words from the first chapter of the Gospel of John for what this Scripture says to us today:

Scripture:

43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip 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.' ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' ⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' ⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' ⁵⁰Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' ⁵¹And [Jesus] said to [Nathanael], 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

Sermon:

Today is the second Sunday in the season of Epiphany. The Christian celebration of Epiphany is often an occasion that we don't celebrate as Presbyterians. It occurs on January 6, and legend has it that this is the date that the wise men came to honor the baby Jesus, presenting him with gifts. Epiphany ends the season of Christmas, which is 12 days. Some say this Christian festival day commemorates the fact that Jesus came not just to the Jews but for all people, as shown in the visit from the Magi who were the first non-Jewish people to recognize Jesus.

But what exactly is Epiphany? An epiphany is an aha moment; a moment when there is a sudden realization, defined as a moment of sudden and great

revelation. Epiphanal moments are rare but can produce great emotional responses. It can be a moment of realization, we understand what we didn't understand before, or we know in our hearts the right answer for us, for example.

Although we celebrate Epiphany when the Magi find the baby Jesus and shower him with gifts, like Christmas, Epiphany is a season in the church calendar. The Magi are not the only people to have an epiphanal moment in Scripture. Today we read about two additional epiphanal moments.

In our first scripture reading we are introduced to Samuel. Samuel's mentor Eli, a priest in the temple, had once been God's anointed one, but he had disappointed God. His sons were doing evil things, and God would not choose them to carry on Eli's work. God was ready to call a new disciple, and in our scripture, God calls the young boy Samuel. God calls to Samuel, but Samuel does not yet know God; he is not yet in relationship with God, we are told. The first three times God calls him, Samuel thinks it is Eli. Finally, Eli knows what is happening and he tells Samuel to go and wait for God to call him again. When God calls the fourth time, Samuel responds to God that he is ready, ready to listen and hear God's call. It's an epiphanal moment.

In our second passage we meet Nathanael. We don't know much about Nathanael. We do know that he is Philip's friend, and Philip wants him to meet Jesus. We also learn from Jesus that Nathanael is "an Israelite in whom there is no deceit" Maybe this means Nathanael is honest; he can be trusted. Maybe he is a little quick to say exactly what he is thinking.

When Philip tells Nathanael he needs to meet "Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth," Nathanael surprisingly says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Now certainly, Nathanael is being candid and direct, and maybe cynical. Maybe he has not had good experiences with people from Nazareth, a girl friend or a work partner. But, more than likely he is speaking directly about the nature of Nazareth itself. Nazareth is a very small, mostly poor, and insignificant town. Micah prophesized that a ruler or shepherd of the Israelite people would come from Bethlehem, not from a place as insignificant as Nazareth.

Thus, Nathanael is called to discipleship by Jesus, but not in the way you would expect. Jesus doesn't say, *come follow me*. Jesus says, *here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!* Perhaps Jesus knows he can't pull one over on Nathanael; Jesus knows Nathanael's heart. But Nathanael asks, "How do you know me?" Nathanael doesn't know Jesus yet, so how should Jesus know him? Nathanael's epiphanal moment comes when Jesus says, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Jesus knows Nathanael in a way that Nathanael does not anticipate. Then Nathanael uses not one, but three titles for Jesus, Rabbi or teacher, Son of God, and King of Israel.

Son of God is especially significant to the author of John's gospel. The title "Son of God" signifies Jesus as the bridge between God and humans; Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. Jesus specifically states this link when he says, "you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." John will continue throughout his gospel to emphasize not only the complete divinity of Jesus but also his complete humanness. What could be more opposite? There is a constant back and forth between the two.

This back and forth nature can be clearly seen in our passage from Samuel. Samuel and God go back and forth four times before Samuel figures out what is happening. Four times before Samuel says, *speak, for I am listening*. How many times does God have to call our name to get our attention? When will we recognize that God knows our hearts and knows our ability to be good disciples. Then, when we finally listen, God doesn't abandon us. God continues to affirm us and walk with us on our path of discipleship. The action continues to go back and forth; it is a give and take; and action and response. A two-way street.

How do you see this give and take nature of relationship with God in your life? In my own life, I rejected God's voice for years. Perhaps, I couldn't hear God's call or I wasn't ready for it. When I did have that epiphanal moment, if you will, I would go back and forth about it. Do I really want to do this? Am I really called? This is too hard! I want to quit! And honestly, there are still days it's too hard and I want to quit. I am fearful, or lazy, or just plain tired.

It is these times of despair or trials that Jesus as fully human speaks to me. *I know your pain*, says Jesus. *I know it's hard; I experienced that too. I will give you the strength you need.*

So, I get back up and try again, to be faithful to the God who knows my heart and who won't let me flounder.

It is a constant back and forth. Heaven is opened and angels go back and forth, descending and ascending not only upon Jesus but upon us as well.

Regardless of mine or your experience with God, Jesus is our link to who God is. We will have epiphanal moments and down-in-the-valley difficult moments. From the experience of Jesus as a human, we know God never stops communicating with us, responding to our needs, holding us, or loving us, even when it's hard.

Today we will ordain and install Priscilla, Stokes, and Jacky to be Ruling Elders in this congregation. Like Samuel and Nathanael, God has called them to service. It may have been an aha, epiphanal moment for them, but it is not the end of their road. They may get to the point where they will get frustrated and want to quit. (I hope not. At least come talk to me first!). But discipleship can be hard and frustrating.

The great reformer, Martin Luther, speaks to this continuing back and forth nature, in this quote, “This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness; not health, but healing; not being, but becoming; not rest, but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished, but it is going on. This is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.”¹

As you go out from this place, you may be looking for an epiphany of your own, or maybe just a simple word from God to keep you going. Maybe you want to strengthen your relationship with God or let others know what a difference God’s relationship has made in your life. Regardless, God is not done with us yet, God will not leave us alone or leave us hanging. After all, God kept calling Samuel, Jesus knew Nathanael’s heart, and God didn’t abandon Jesus. Our discipleship is a back and forth, a relationship, an understanding that God has great love for us and continues to call us and mold us. When God calls, let us be like Samuel and say, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

In the name of God who calls us, Jesus who is our partner in discipleship, and the Spirit who continues to make more of us every day. Amen.

¹ Defense and Explanation of all the Articles (1521), LW vol. 39, from David Lose <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/01/epiphany-2-b-gracious-invitation/> accessed 1/13/18.