

January 18, 2015

Second Sunday after Epiphany

**"Did You Call?"**

By Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

1 Samuel 3:1-10 ~ John 1:43-51

The Gospel reading this morning is about sight ... clarity of sight. The calling of Nathanael is one of the better known stories in scripture. Nathanael's *squinting* to see anything good coming out of Nazareth ... Philip's invitation to "*Come and See.*" Jesus *looking ... contemplating ... watching* Nathanael sitting under a fig tree. It's also about the promise that we would see greater things than these. It's actually all about *sight* and *insight* ... *clarity of vision*.

"Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "I have a dream!" Isaiah said, "I saw the Lord!" Hosea said, "Without a vision the people perish!" Jesus healed those who could not see, but he condemned those who would not see. And they were all talking ... not about sight, but about *insight*. Not a better *view*, but a better *vision*. Not about the senses, but about *spiritual sensitivity*... about seeing with the *heart* more than seeing with the *head*.

National Geographic Photographer Dewitt Jones says that most people say "I'll *believe* it when I *see* it!" But he says that people of the heart say "I'll *see* it when I *believe* it!" Others concur. Morrie Schwartz, in *Tuesdays with Morrie*, says "Sometime you cannot believe what you *see*. You have to believe what you *feel*." And, Lee Ellis says simply, "*Follow Your Heart.*" It's all about getting out of your *head* and into your *heart* ... beyond your *eyesight* to your *insight*. So, when Philip said "Nathanael," "*Come and See,*" he went straight for the heart. And that's where God always goes.

Nathanael asked a question of Philip. In fact, he has been immortalized by this one haunting question: "Can *anything good* come out of Nazareth?" Nathanael, no doubt, had many good qualities ... said many good things ... did many good deeds. But he's remembered for seven words: "Can *anything good* come out of Nazareth?" You really can't blame him for that. Nazareth had a rather unseemly reputation. They were share croppers ... grape stompers ... unpolished ... uncultured ... maybe even irreligious and immoral. They certainly threw Jesus, their hometown, homegrown boy, out of their own synagogue, and ran him out of town. No wonder Nathanael was suspect! He had every right to be! Who would have ever looked for God in such a place ... in such a place as Nazareth?

That's the problem with God ... always out of place ... always getting out of bounds ... always on the margins ... always coloring outside the lines ... always showing up where you least suspect ... Bethlehem ... Nazareth ... Golgotha. And sometimes we just want to throw up our hands and wonder why can't God act more like God? Why can't God act with a little more class;

charm; culture; elegance. Just a little more godlike! Why can't God stay in God's place? We'd all be so much more comfortable. The way it is, it's just so frustrating!

A father noticed his little girl drawing a picture, and asked, "what are you drawing, honey?" And she said, "God. I'm drawing a picture of God." Dad said, "Sweetheart, no one knows what God looks like." And she said, "Well, when I finish my picture they will!" I like that story because it reminds me of childhood innocence. But I get really nervous around grown-up people who think that *they* know exactly what God looks like ... people who think they're in charge of God and in charge of the Bible. But you know, it really doesn't matter, because nobody is in charge of God. God still shows up uninvited! Always crashing the party! Always refusing to honor our prejudice!

Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life we celebrate this week, said: "The ultimate measure of a person is not where they stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but where they stand at times of challenge and controversy." I'm proud to be a UCC pastor because The United Church of Christ has a great reputation for getting out of bounds ... for following God from the comfort zones to the forbidden zones. Whatever the pressures ... the threats ... the inconveniences ... we've accepted the challenge. We never shrink from controversy. We dare to care! We've extended grace to everyone ... to you and to me ... with all of our wounds and warts. We're known as the church with the open doors, where grace is indiscriminate ... the church of the extravagant welcome that proudly proclaims "No matter *who* you are, or *where* you are on life's journey, you're welcome here." But we weren't the first to come up with such radical hospitality ... we just asked ourselves "what would Jesus do?"

Jesus saw Nathanael sitting under a fig tree. Whatever his reason for being there ... contemplation ... exhaustion ... desperation ... it really didn't matter to Jesus. Can you imagine what the talk shows would say today! Rush Limbaugh might tell him "Get a job!" Dr. Phil might say, "Get a life!" But, Jesus said, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." Jesus beheld Nathaniel for who he is, even in his cynicism. He knew that Nathaniel will not stand for the lie. In Nathaniel he saw no pretense ... no deceit. Jesus looked beyond *eyesight* with *insight* and saw a young man with true and authentic value under a bushel basket, and he calls us to do the same ... *to do* what he would do. Christ looks at you and me and he sees past where we are from. He sees the extraordinary possibility of what we may become with the Spirit of God at work in us. And he affirms us.

So I say to you today, look around you. Look for God everywhere you go ... in every person you meet. Listen to God's opinion of you ... to what Jesus blesses in your being. Come and see what Jesus might make of you and what you might help him make of others.

God is all around us ... in the ordinary places ... in the unguarded moments ... in the flesh of those we don't even notice ... a grocery clerk, a harried waiter, a hungry child, the person next to you in the pew today, or even some guy from Nazareth, of all places. But we do not see God in these places ... in these moments ... in these people ... because we are not looking for God. We are not mature enough or alert enough or experienced enough to see what is right there in plain sight before our eyes. "Come and see," Philip urged Nathaniel. But seeing takes time and

energy. We must focus our attention ... look hard ... follow a while ... before the vision of God's glory shines through.

We cannot go by first impressions. It takes some discipline ... some commitment ... some consistent connection. Truth is, we don't follow Jesus because we *immediately* see him for who he is ... we follow in order to *see* who he is ... and across the years God is disclosed ever the more through *our* discipleship.

In my work as a chaplain in Chicago, I had the privilege of meeting Jorge. Like so many people suffering with AIDS he was afraid; ashamed; abandoned; alone. He was unwelcome in his own church, and had been turned out of his own home. He just wanted to love and be loved. Not long before he died, Jorge said to me, "Chaplain, God doesn't have space for someone like me." And I looked into his beautiful, brown eyes, held his frail hands in mine, and said, "Jorge, God has just the right space for someone *just* like you!" And in answer to our prayers, Jorge died peacefully soon after that, at home. Home at last!

I believe that's the spiritual vision for this new year. To work, witness, and minister relentlessly until all of God's children are home free. To look under every tree, turn over every rock, upset every bushel basket, and open every closet door - for all of God's children! And tell them God has room for someone just like them.

One of my favorite stories was told by Anthony de Mello about a holy man who reached the outskirts of a village one night. DeMello writes:

The sage had settled down under a tree for the night when a villager came running up to him and said, "The stone! The stone! Give me the precious stone!" "What stone?" asked the sage. "Last night the Lord Shiva appeared to me in a dream," said the villager, "and told me that if I went to the outskirts of the village at dusk, I should find a sage who would give me a precious stone that would make me rich forever." The sage rummaged in his bag and pulled out a stone. "He probably meant this one," he said, as he handed the stone over to the villager. "I found it on a forest path some days ago. You can certainly have it." The man looked at the stone in wonder. It was a diamond ... perhaps the largest diamond in the world. It was as large as a man's head. He took the diamond and walked away. But all night long he tossed about on his bed, unable to sleep. The next morning, at the crack of dawn, he woke the holy man and said, "Please take this back and give me the wealth that made it possible for you to give this diamond away so easily."

We have all been given that wealth. Jesus promised in v. 50, "You will see greater things than these ... You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." That's the promise! And the image is one of Jesus stretched out like a ladder between heaven and earth ... a conduit of God's love and grace ... a visual and unforgettable reminder that God has made contact with us.

Herbert Benson says, we're "*wired*" for God. We're spiritually connected, and as Christians we believe that Jesus is the *conduit*. So, I'm persuaded that no busy signals, no bad connections, no

re-boots, no computer viruses or anything else will ever separate us from the persistent, determined, unrelenting grace of God. That's the good news! That's the gospel vision! That's our message of hope! And that's our mission for this new year! Let's invite others to "Come and See." May we pray?

Gracious and loving God, help us to remember it is by your goodness that we were born into this world. Help us to remember that it is by your grace that we have been kept all the day long even unto this hour. Help us to remember that it is by your love, fully revealed in the face of Jesus, that we are redeemed. Help us to remember to share that wonderful, glorious welcome with everyone ... no matter *who* they are, or *where* they are on life's journey. Amen.