

Pastor Roy's sermon from January 18, 2015

“The word of the Lord was rare in” the days of Samuel and Eli; “visions were not widespread...”

Was God not speaking? Or were people not listening? What was special about Samuel? Was it his openness? Was he listening by virtue of his innocence? Had he not yet learned that God doesn't speak in simple straightforward ways? Had he not yet learned to look the other way when God spoke? Had he not yet given up that God was at work. . .in Israel. . .for hope?

Samuel listened. Samuel believed. Now Eli taught Samuel well. Eli could have given up, but he tried again even after he was unable to teach his sons. Faithfulness prevailed. The faith was passed on, not through his blood line, but he passed his faith along.

Eli and Samuel kept faith that God was speaking in Israel. “As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.” Did they know because he talked well, or because he listened well?

Samuel might have been tempted to give up on being a prophet-priest. He was not from a line of prophets or priests. He simply had a faithful mother, father, and mentor, all of whom refused to give up on the faith. Who listened to the word of the Lord and then speak hope into Israel for all the world to hear. God is speaking in Israel because Samuel is listening and believes. He is listening, not just to what everyone around him is saying about God, he is listening to God's Spirit whispering truths of justice, integrity, faith in a God who is active in Israel.

Fast forward 1100 or so years. Jesus is gathering disciples. Unlikely disciples. But he is looking for followers who are willing to follow. Who are willing to learn to listen for God's voice. He wasn't looking for leaders who have already made up their minds. Inward faith expressed in grace and justice and mercy.

Before his conversation with Jesus, Nathaniel cannot imagine that he would be noticed by anyone. He is not important. He is not brilliant. He is not a mover/shaker type. Perhaps most comfortable close to home under his own fig tree. Maybe he can see Philip fitting in with this Jesus of Nazareth character, but him? No, not likely. Pretty sure he's not interested in anything that comes out of Nazareth.

Then Jesus reveals that he has taken notice of Nathaniel—the defenses drop--and that is enough to draw him into the circle. In this passage, Jesus doesn't even call Nathaniel. Philip does. But Jesus makes clear that Nathaniel is welcome. . .and known with a complement. Jesus takes notice of Nathaniel's honesty (“No guile.”) and offers him a promise (“You will see the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”)

Nathaniel learns the promise of Jesus as the new Bethel. Here is where God is coming and going, just like the angels of Jacob's ladder revealing God's presence and covenant with Jacob. In this brief exchange, Nathaniel learns that Jesus has noticed him and God has noticed Jesus. Evidently to Nathaniel, this sounds like a good plan for his life.

Paul in Corinthians applies this message to each believer. “God takes notice of you.” Even your body is important to God. The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. God with us. God in us. Us in God.

We are tempted to think that we don't matter. Oh, I'm not important. Why should God speak to me as God spoke to Samuel? Would Jesus notice me, as he noticed Nathaniel? I'm just me. Is my body important and the way I treat it? Does it matter how I take care of myself, the spirit of my body?

Paul, Nathaniel and Jesus, Samuel and Eli all assure us, “Yes, God is speaking to you and me, and God's care for us influences our care for ourselves. The Spirit is dwelling with us in our bodies. Jesus is Beth-el. The house of God. And you know what? We are Bethel too, the house of God. Your body is the house of God. It matters. It is a holy habitation. We are the place where God reveals God's-self to the world. If it doesn't happen through you, it won't happen in this moment, in this place and time. We are the body of Christ. Beth-el.

In you dwells and from you is proclaimed the Word of God. Even if we fail to grasp it, this is true. Not for the sake of shaming us, but for the beauty of its reality. Perhaps we should spend some time sitting with the truth that we are the house of God. May we invest more time listening, making room to sense the word of God coming to us. Making time to celebrate the Spirit in our bodies. These holy houses. Thanks be to God for the gift of these holy dwellings.