

Epiphany 2B, 2009
1 Sam 3:1-10; Ps 139:1-5, 12-18; 1 Cor 6:12-20; John 1:43-51
Can You Hear?

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How do you hear God's voice? Quiet and general, in the same sort of way we might see signs of God's handiwork in earth and in the skies above? Signs of God at work in nature, or in the care and love of other people around you, in moments of worship and prayer and reading the Scriptures, when you sense God is somehow near and present?

Or do you hear God calling you directly by name, with a call, an invitation, that is just for you? Do you hear God's voice as one who knows you inside-out and yet, despite the mess that most of us carry around inside, still loves you and calls you? You would certainly not be alone if you thought that only happened to other people, if indeed it happened at all.

The Scriptures – themselves a voice of God, albeit through the often perplexing lens of human interpretation – talk to us of how we may hear God's voice in a myriad of ways; sometimes his call undeniably straight to us, other times as that soft background chorus whispering "See me all around you". In this season of epiphany, we are drawn towards God's revelation of himself to us; his communication of himself to us. We've moved past Christmas, where we celebrated God's great communication and revelation of himself to us in Jesus Christ, we've celebrated the baptism of Christ, where Christ himself heard God's voice speaking directly to him; and now, in what we call "ordinary time", we begin to consider how God continues to speak to us and reveal himself in the ordinary slog of our lives.

Let's hear what the Scriptures today tell us about hearing God's call. Two people – Samuel and Nathanael, separated by centuries, by age, and by circumstances, hear God's call to them.

Samuel was asleep, in the Temple. He wakes, hearing his voice called: "Samuel, Samuel", and of course he thinks it is Eli the priest calling him. It happens twice more, before Eli twigs to this being God calling Samuel. Samuel's just a boy –probably around twelve years old, and he's not had any experience of knowing God in a personal way. In fact, we're told that God's voice had been silent for some time amongst the Hebrew people – there'd been no prophetic revelations for years, throughout a time in Israel's history when people pretty much ignored God. Judges 21 (v.25) puts it: "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" - which included some pretty dirty and God-dishonoring deeds by Eli's sons. So Samuel doesn't know this is God calling him. It's outside of what is known to him. He needs Eli to explain to him what he's hearing and how to respond.

In our Gospel passage today, Nathanael is gathered up by Philip to come and see this Jesus who had found him: "him about whom Moses in the law and the prophets wrote".

Nathanael's initial response to this person being Jesus, the son of Joseph of Nazareth - was to begin to filter out Jesus, to write him off as a bogan from the sticks, from that little hick town, Nazareth in Galilee, out of which nothing memorable or special could possibly come. As a person of the culture of that time, he immediately sizes up people according to where they come from. That's how it was – people were automatically judged and stereotyped by their home village, their lineage, family, their gender – there was no such

thing as individual identity. And Nazareth was, well, the pits. So Nathanael's on the verge of instinctively discounting Jesus and anything he might have to say. And, of course, we see here the great offense of the incarnation: God chooses to come to us through the lowly and despised, and in an era where social status determined everything. So this Jesus is not just God – the divine - clothed with tainted humanity – but a child of Nazareth, to boot!

For a moment there, Nathanael could have turned away from Philip's invitation to "come and see" and just stayed with his negative preconceptions, but he doesn't; he goes with Philip to Jesus. And what he then hears, is Jesus up close and personal, not conforming to any of the culturally expected ways he could have stereotyped Nathanael, revealing that he really knows Nathanael, can really see into who Nathanael is, as an individual: "here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit". Jesus looks past Nathanael's skepticism and prejudices, steps outside cultural norms, and recognizes in Nathanael an authenticity and capacity for honesty –here is a man who will call a spade a spade, and will not be afraid to speak his mind, a man who himself, like Jesus, will be able to know and speak the truth even where this might be culturally scandalous. And Nathanael begins to see Jesus with the openness that Jesus has seen in him, through eyes unclouded by the prejudices his culture has taught him. What Nathanael begins to see is a new world, a world where heaven was meeting earth in this extraordinary person Jesus Christ.

So what is it that these two stories –Samuel and Nathanael – tell us about hearing God's voice?

First is the ease with which we may miss God's call. Samuel hears his name called clearly, but doesn't recognize this as God's voice, calling him specifically. He hears it as the obvious -it must be his master Eli calling him. Inexperience and uncertainty hold him back from recognizing this as God speaking, but he was willing to trust Eli and to respond to God. He was open to understanding this as God's voice, and was open to doing as God asked. (and if you recall the next bit of the story, that meant going back to Eli and telling him that, basically, God was going to punish Eli and his sons and descendents for their wrongdoing. Not an easy thing to have to tell your trusted mentor when you're still a boy.) And Samuel went on to become a great prophet of Israel. With Nathanael, it was his skepticism and prejudices against Nazoreans that could easily have prevented him from coming to see and discovering Jesus as Son of God and King of Israel.

Each one of us here may well have our ears closed to God in the same way as either of these two men. Skepticism –is all this believing in an active, real God a bit far fetched? Or not recognizing that God may in fact be speaking personally to us, through events, through other people, through a quiet, slow but persistent nudging that seems to come from nowhere you can readily identify? Perhaps it's preconceptions about to whom and how God might speak: God's call can come when we least expect it, in ways we least expect or mightn't welcome, to people whom we might think are the last ones God might want to call, and through people we mightn't want to take notice of. To us, even.

A final, underlying point: our ability to hear can be very much determined by whether we believe that this almighty God wants to commune, communicate, with us personally and specifically. So we can be deaf to God's voice and his call because we don't understand that God in Christ knows us intimately and individually, by our names, and desires to be in relationship with us and to use each one of us in his work of love, care, peace, healing and justice in the world. And more than that, to use us in his primary work of calling each

person into reconciliation with God –from which the love, peace and justice will flow. His calling of us has nothing to do with being talented or with what we think we can and can't do – look at Samuel – a mere boy; and Nathanael – nobody special. Just open and willing to follow.

Samuel is called by name, Nathanael is called specifically and is already known intimately by Jesus, and in that wonderful Psalm today, Psalm 139,(p.370) we read “O Lord, you have searched me out and known me...you knit me together in my mother's womb...you knew my soul ...when I was formed in secret”. God knows each one of us, individually; know every single bit of our selves- our thoughts, our bodies, our words, each step we take. There's no hiding from this intimate knowing by God –he knows us through and through. And this God loves us, regardless of what we think we might want to hide from him , and calls us individually, by name, into relationship with him and into service for his kingdom.

How do you hear God's call to you, personally? Are you open to saying, like Samuel, “Speak, for your servant is listening”, and like Nathanael, to come and see Jesus, to have your eyes and ears opened to God's call?