

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, January 14, 2018 // Epiphany 2, Year B

The Gospel: John 1:43-51

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."

Background and general observations

All three of the lessons appointed for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany are rich in meaning, with common and complementary themes. For example, the first lesson from I Samuel, tells the well-known story of the calling of the boy Samuel. You'll remember that Samuel is lying down in the temple when he hears a voice calling him, "Samuel! Samuel!" Samuel leaps up and runs to Eli in a nearby room and says, "Here I am, for you called me." Eli tells the boy to go lie down again, for he did not call him. Samuel hears the same call three times, and continues to mistake the voice of the Lord for the voice of Eli, because "Samuel did not yet know the Lord," we are told. But on the third time, Eli "perceives" (though his eyesight has grown dim) that the Lord is calling Samuel, so he tells the boy to go lie down again, and when he hears the voice again, he should say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." (I Samuel 3:1-10)

Interestingly, the Epistle appointed for this day includes Paul's teaching about our bodies being temples of the Holy Spirit. "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (1 Corinthians 6:12-20) One connection to the first lesson is the idea of God speaking in the temple where Samuel is ministering with Eli, and God speaking in the temple of our own bodies.

In the Gospel lesson above, we have the calling of Philip and Nathanael. This passage comes at the conclusion of the first chapter of John's Gospel. Immediately before this passage, John the Baptist points out to his disciples who Jesus is, and two of them follow Jesus. When Jesus turns and sees them following him, he asks them, "What are you looking for?"—an important question we might all ponder for ourselves. When the two disciples ask Jesus where he is staying, Jesus responds by saying, "Come and see," which of course is an invitation repeated in the passage above. One of the two disciples is Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, and Andrew goes and gets Peter to come along with them. There is a sense in these opening verses of people seeing and experiencing something that they want to tell others about. After the passage appointed for today, the second chapter of John's Gospel begins with the story of the wedding at Cana, and the miracle of changing water to wine.

Running through all three of these lessons is the idea of God's presence going unrecognized in our world. At times it seems as if God is calling us repeatedly or trying to make God's presence known, but we mistake God's voice for something else (Samuel and Eli), or we go about unaware of the extraordinary presence within us (Paul to the Corinthians), or we have our preconceived notions about God that prevent us from seeing how God might be doing something new (Nathanael – "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?").

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. "Come and see."

One way of thinking about the Christian life is to say that being a Christian is not about having the right *ideas* about God, but about having a *genuine experience* of God and then showing forth the fruits of that experience in your life. In other words, Christians are people who have been changed by an encounter they have had with God, much as the disciples are changed by their encounter with Jesus. Then, when we want others to know about our encounter or experience of God, we tell them, "Come and see." We do not simply try to convince others with our ideas about God and our theological arguments; we simply introduce them to what we have experienced and invite them to see for themselves what a difference this makes.

- Have you tended to think of the Christian life as a system of beliefs *about* God or as a divine encounter *with* God that results in a changed life?
- Has someone in your life ever invited you, in effect, to "come and see" how God was a part of his or her life?
- If you were to ask people to "come and see" your life as evidence of God's presence and activity, what would they see? And how would you respond if someone asked you in return to "come and see"?
- When we invite people to "come and see" in our church, what do they experience, and what is our role in the experience of newcomers?

2. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Nazareth was a small, isolated town of little consequence. Nazareth could represent all of those ne'er-do-wells in your life, all of those people who amounted to nothing or who have consistently caused trouble, and any place, situation, or relationship that clearly has come to no good. It is precisely from this place that God emerges in Jesus.

- Who and what are the Nazareths in your life? What are those situations or relationships or people whom we have written off and from which, we are convinced, no good can come? What are the Nazareths in your marriage? In your children's lives? In your professional life or home life? In your friendships or your physical health? In other words, where have you excluded God or dismissed God when in fact something God-given may be trying to emerge?

- In his book *Your God is Too Small*, Biblical scholar J.B. Phillips asserts that we have preconceived notions about God that box God into something much smaller than God is. We are not able to see how God is at work in the world, because God doesn't always fit within our preconceived notions; God is beyond what we are capable of imagining. Where might God be at work in your world and in the world around you, but you're either not looking, not paying attention, or are reluctant to accept that God could be beyond what you can perceive?
3. Philip calls Nathanael, Andrew gets Peter to come along, Samuel needs Eli to help him understand what is happening in his life, and we all need Paul's reminder that we are temples of the Holy Spirit. It is not possible to see ourselves the way others see us; quite often it is *their* perception that is more generous and more aligned with the way God sees us. Who in your life do you feel like sees you as God sees you? Who points you to the presence and activity of God? Are you able to help and see others in this way?
 4. After Nathanael speaks disparagingly about Jesus' origins to Philip, we find Jesus complimenting Nathanael as "an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." Nathanael is astonished that Jesus knows him. What does this encounter suggest about Jesus? Do you have a personal sense of being known by God? If so, how do you describe the feeling of being so known?
 5. It is often said that one must "see to believe." Concerning faith, this could be a complicated prerequisite. And then, in Nathanael's case, we are led to think that because he is *seen*, he believes. It's an interesting shift in how we might ponder the idea of witnessing (or being witnessed ourselves). How do you respond? Is your experience of knowing God rooted in your having "seen" God, or is it rooted in your being seen *by* God?