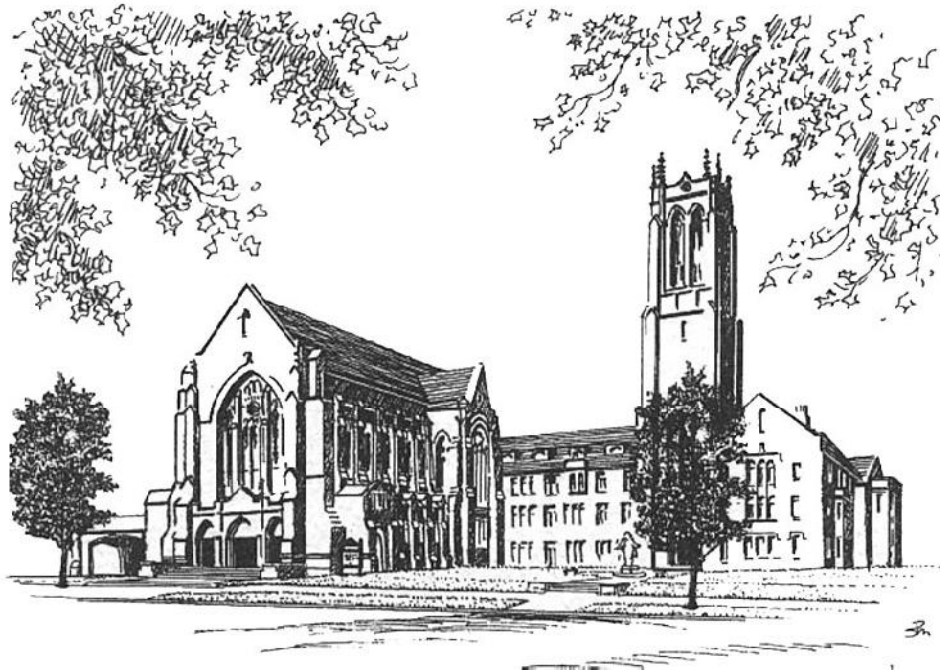


LOOKING FOR DISCIPLES
by
Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston
January 15, 2012
(*Second Sunday after the Epiphany*)
8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

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Texts: 1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20); Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18 (UMH 854); 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; and John 1:43-51

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. ²At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was.

⁴Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me."

But he said, "I did not call; lie down again."

So he went and lay down.

⁶The Lord called again, "Samuel!"

Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me."

But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again."

⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me."

Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. ⁹Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

So Samuel went and lay down in his place. ¹⁰Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!"

And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

¹¹Then the Lord said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. ¹²On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. ¹⁴Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever."

¹⁵Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli.

¹⁶But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son."

He said, "Here I am."

¹⁷Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you."

¹⁸So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

¹⁹As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. ²⁰And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

John 1:43-51

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 toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"

⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get 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 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."

Lots of things pass for Christianity these days. Entertainers, sports stars, politicians, and public preachers say and do things that don't reflect a lot of depth or thought and sometimes not much love and compassion. The public image of Christianity has taken a beating in our world today. All the surveys and research reveals that young people especially are not attracted to the faith that seems angry, afraid, and narrow. More and more people these days are not raised in a congregation, a congregation of real people who though not perfect try as best they can to care for one another and to live faithfully in a complex world. For people who are not a part of a congregation, the only image they have of Christianity and Christians is what they see that gets reported by the news media about what some not so thoughtful or caring person does or says and represents his or her words or actions to be based on his or her Christian faith. You could say we have an image problem but it goes deeper than image. We seem to have lost our way about what it means to be a person of faith in a diverse and complex world.

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus in our world today?

The simple invitation from Jesus in our gospel reading today is to "Follow me." So, let's ask today, what does it mean to follow Jesus today?

I want to make two affirmations. First of all, God knows us before we know God. In the first reading today, God calls Samuel before Samuel even knows who God is. Samuel is just a boy. He serves the old priest Eli, but he has not found his own calling until he hears someone call his name. He of course thinks it is Eli, but Eli tells him to listen again. Finally, Samuel realizes that it is God calling. It is the old priest Eli who helps Samuel to understand that it is God calling. Samuel's response is simply, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." God knows and calls Samuel before Samuel knows and responds to God.

There is a similar pattern in the gospel story today. It is Jesus who is looking for disciples. It is very early in his ministry, and he needs some helpers.

Jesus has already recruited Peter and Andrew, and now Philip. Philip's call is fairly straight forward as recorded in the text. "Follow me." He does, and he also goes to find someone else, Nathanael.

Nathanael's story is a little more nuanced. When Philip invites him to become a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanael's reply is "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" It is an interesting response. Perhaps it represents some prejudice toward a small, out-of-the-way town. Nazareth was not a prominent village in any sense. We can all be guilty of regional and racial biases and stereotypes. Nathanael doubts that Nazareth could produce anyone of significance. There are places you and I might say that about.

But there may be more to his answer than simple prejudice. You would think that simple prejudice would not recommend itself very well to Jesus as material for a disciple. Then again, Jesus is willing to meet anyone where they are and help them move to where they are better people.

That being said, if Nathanael was a student of scripture, he would know that the village of Nazareth is never mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures. Bethlehem is the city that is connected to the Messiah, but none of these disciples at this point apparently knows anything of Jesus' untimely birth in Bethlehem. So, Nathanael's response could be based on his knowledge of scripture. How could Jesus be the Messiah if he comes from Nazareth and not Bethlehem? And there is indication that he is a student of the scripture.

At any rate, Philip will not accept his protest and simply invites him to "come and see." When Jesus sees Nathanael coming, he identifies him as a person in whom there is no deceit. That is a rather odd statement also that can perhaps be explained. Nathanael wants to know how Jesus knows him. As I said, he knows Nathanael before Nathanael knew Jesus.

Jesus' again strange reply is, "I saw you under the fig tree." It was generally understood at the time that sitting under a fig tree was a very suitable place to study the scripture. It was understood to be a place of peace and security. So, all of this begins to make some sense. Nathanael is a student of scripture. He knows the Messiah is not supposed to come from Nazareth and he is honest and straight forward with his feelings. There is no deceit. Nathanael is convinced. He too decides to follow Jesus.

Jesus then tells him that he will see angels ascending and descending. Yet another interesting reference, but it all begins to make sense. This appears to be a reference to Jacob who had the dream about the ladder leading up to heaven where angels were ascending and descending. And if you know your Bible stories, if you are a student of the scripture, you know that Jacob was a deceitful person. He tricked his older brother Esau out of the birthright, and he tricked his father Isaac out of the paternal blessing due to the oldest son. Nathanael is not a person of deceit as Jacob was.

Sitting under the fig tree indicates that he was a student of the scriptures and that he knew there was no reference to Nazareth in the Hebrew Scriptures. And he would come to believe that Jesus is the new “ladder,” if you will, that connects heaven to earth. Jesus knew Nathanael very well before Nathanael knew Jesus.

Both of our stories today indicate that God knows everything about us before we know anything about God. That’s our first affirmation about God. Knowing all about us, God still wants people like you and me to become disciples.

The second affirmation is that God desires helpers, followers, disciples to work with God in the world. Whatever it is that Jesus wants to do for the world, he chooses not to do it alone. He invites a group of ordinary, everyday people, people like you and me, to do it with him.

Perhaps our Christian witness in the world would be more credible if we believed and acted well on those two affirmations. God knows and loves all people before any of us knows anything about God. God seeks to enlist people who will do the work of God in the world, calling people to discipleship to love and compassion, justice and mercy. If Christians are engaged in acts of love and compassion, justice and mercy, the world will believe in the God of Jesus.

Disciples are followers, literally learners, those who learn from Jesus and live his way. If Nathanael was a student of the scriptures, so should we all be. It is in studying scripture, spending time in prayer, and gathering for worship together that we learn the ways of Jesus.

I ask you to learn the ways of Jesus and to live them. There is no better or more believable witness in our world than that. Perhaps the most authentic public witness to the ways of Jesus in my lifetime was Martin Luther King, Jr. It is why we remember his life this weekend. His life witness was clear. God loves all people; all people are equal in God's eyes. Injustices must be resisted in non-violent ways. His was a powerful and credible witness.

But all of us have the opportunity to make a witness as well. God is love. God's love extends all people. God calls people to the way of love in our world.

A pastor friend of mine recently told me a story about a national convocation of directors of children's ministry. After one of the presentations, a man came up to the presenter and said to her, "Thank you for teaching children the stories of Jesus." He said, "I was one of those who was held hostage in Iran. I was chained by my leg to an unmovable object in a small room." He said, "I was so angry. I hated my captors and I hated the chain that held me captive." He said, "I was so angry I wanted to chew my leg off to get free of that chain.

"Then one day," he said, "I decided to tell myself again as many stories of Jesus as I could remember. For every link of chain from my leg to the wall, I would tell myself a story of Jesus." He said, "The stories of Jesus transformed me from hate to love, from anger to peace and I was able to survive."

So, he said, "Teach children the stories of Jesus because I was three links short of stories that I could remember and I almost didn't make it."

In a complex world, just two affirmations today. God knows and loves all people. God seeks to engage each of us as disciples of God's love in our world.