

Epiphany 2 2020
Rev. Adam T. Trambley
1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51
January 17, 2021, St. John's Sharon, Pandemic Worship Service

We hear two call stories in our scriptures this morning. In our first reading, the boy Samuel is sleeping in the temple of the Lord and he hears the voice of God calling to him, "Samuel, Samuel." He does not know what to do with this call, however, until he consults someone who knows a little more about the walking in the ways of the Lord. The priest Eli tells him, "I did not call you...but if you hear the voice again, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" Samuel hears God's voice again and responds, and thus begins the personal relationship between the Lord and one of the most important prophets of early Israel.

Then in our gospel, Nathanael hears a call. Philip tells him that they have found the Messiah. Nathanael's first impulse is a snarky, scornful one. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" But his friend -- his friend Philip who has already encountered Jesus -- gives him instructions on the next step. He says, "Come and see." And Nathanael goes and sees, and finds the Son of God and the King of Israel.

Over the past few weeks, we have heard many calls in our community. Some have answered such a call by violently storming our nation's Capitol in a way that has led to multiple deaths and property damage. Additional calls have been made for protests and resistance at the inauguration this coming week and in state capitals throughout the country. Other calls have also been made for different responses to these events from a variety of sources.

The question in such times of crisis is which calls do we answer, especially when various groups make claims that God is on their side. An important way to answer this question is to ask, seriously and courageously, what do the people who seem to know the ways of God say? What wisdom do they have for our next steps? Who can we turn to for answers?

I would submit that on this weekend in particular, we have a number of guides that we should be listening to.

The first is our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry who spoke to us last week and said:

I am a follower of Jesus of Nazareth because I believe that his way of love and his way of life is the way of life for us all. I believe that unselfish, sacrificial love, love that seeks the good and the welfare and the well-being of others, as well as the self, that this is the way that can lead us and guide us to do what is just, to do what is right, to do what is merciful. It is the way that can lead us beyond the chaos to community.

Second, Bishop Sean joined other bishops this week to write,

As your bishops, we write today imploring you to stay away from these protests and any counter-protests that might occur. In these perilous times, when public demonstrations carry significant

risk of both violence and exposure to COVID-19, we believe that God calls us to exercise both our Christian witness and our civic responsibility in ways that promote peace and safety.

Staying home does not, however, mean staying silent. We hope that all people of goodwill will join us in raising our voices to support our country's democracy, letting our elected officials know that we are praying for them, particularly in the aftermath of last week's siege of the U.S. Capitol. Whether you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, or an independent, please let your elected officials know that you cherish our representative democracy and our pursuit of a more perfect union, and that you expect that those who are found responsible for last week's violence to be held accountable. Most of all, in the coming days, we ask you to pray.

We might also look to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a pastor whom we remember this weekend. Dr. King knew something about taking action when necessary. He knew something about standing up to injustice. And he knew something about calling our nation to be its best self. In *A Letter From Birmingham City Jail* he writes about how to determine if a protest is good and righteous, or if it is too extreme. I commend the entire letter to be read, especially by white American Christians. Two points he makes are especially relevant in our current circumstance.

The first is that self-purification comes before direct action. Dr. King ensured that people answering his call were prepared for what they might face. They prayed for those who seemed to be their enemies. They sought the help of Almighty God in showing their enemies love. They did not go forward until they had satisfactorily answered the questions: "Are you able to accept blows without retaliation?" and "Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?". Direct action that results in a more just and Christian society can only succeed based on love, and that love starts in the hearts of those undertaking the activity.

The second point Dr. King makes is that some laws are unjust. He knew from experience that some official procedures are unfair and oppressive. Yet he said that, "One who breaks an unjust law must do it *openly, lovingly*...and with a willingness to accept the penalty." Dr. King wrote his letter from a Birmingham jail to which he was sent for parading without a permit, even though the forces of racism at that time refused to provide a permit for a parade demanding an end to segregation. Dr. King was no supporter of anarchy, no supporter of vengeance, and no supporter of vilifying enemies to further a cause. Instead, as a follower of Jesus, as a Christian who believed in redemption and love, he consistently chose nonviolent action after collecting the facts, talking to those willing to talk, and undertaking the self-purification necessary to any Christian action. By holding people accountable, Dr. King sought to change hearts and build a beloved community that included everyone, including people who saw themselves for a time or a season as his enemies.

There is one Biblical figure I would suggest we avoid during this season. Pontius Pilate famously asked the question, "What is truth?" This question has been on display during these days when people are able to squirrel themselves away into niche on-line and cable echo chambers where we only hear what we want to hear. Stereotypes, false narratives, and outright lies abound. Some parade hate and prejudice around in the unprovable conspiracy theories. Some promote agendas by vilifying and de-humanizing enemies. Some are well-intentioned but so one-sided as to be

dangerous misinformation. The message seems to be truth is relative and if we shout loud enough and often enough then our opinion becomes the truth. Pontius Pilate might agree.

But there is a truth, and that truth is real regardless of our particular opinions or feelings about it. Truth exists about the pandemic and the vaccines, even if medicine, like all science, is prone to a variety of human errors. Truth exists about elections, even if sometimes mistakes are made and corrected. Truth exists about climate change, even if some details are outliers from broader trends. And truth exists about inequalities of race and class and gender and sexuality that still plague this country, even if we often ignore them. Truth exists, and we are responsible for talking to people and watching programs and reading articles where people are honestly doing their best to seek it out and share it. Our media have blurred the lines between entertainment, propaganda, ranting, informed opinion, and facts. Following Jesus who was the capital-T Truth means we must be able to tell the difference so we can know the small t-truth in our current situation. In times of crisis, knowing and acting on truth can be a matter of life and death for ourselves and others.

The difference between “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” and “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” is the difference between hearing wisdom from those committed to following Jesus way of Love and reacting from misinformed prejudices. We all need to seek godly counsel, seek the truth, and respond appropriately.