

January 17, 2021 - 2nd Sunday after Epiphany - Reflection

1 Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139:1-5,12-17; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

Last Sunday we celebrated the feast of the Baptism of Jesus and were reminded of that time when Jesus entered the waters of the Jordan and arose to hear the voice of God and to see the Holy Spirit descend like a dove. This took place within the ministry of John the Baptizer and we know that there were some other things that happened around the Jordan at that time. It is sometimes a bit confusing to merge the accounts of that event that are contained in the four gospels but I believe it is important to try to understand how the accounts can fit together. It would seem, according to St. John, that a gathering of people assembled and remained around the Jordan and formed a band of disciples who followed John the Baptizer. In our day we might call them fans but they were more than just admirers. We can deduce some of the reasons for their presence by looking at some similar events in our day. A few years ago a young girl, Greta Thunberg, became famous for her passion to address the issue of climate change in the world. From her efforts many other people, mostly young people, who wished for the same sort of thing picked up that banner and began to work at fostering a different approach to how we are managing this planet. I believe John the Baptizer offered the same sort of thing to the young people of Palestine. You see, for many years the once proud nation of Israel had lived under the authority of a foreign power. First it was the Babylonians, then the Persians, followed by Greeks, and finally the Romans. The descendants of Abraham were tired of this and yearned for the day when God would send his Messiah to restore the fortune of Israel. In preparation for the arrival of the promised Messiah John proclaimed a need for the nation to repent and he offered an outward sign of that repentance, baptism in the Jordan, and in the process attracted some people who were feeling the same way. From John we know that Simon/Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, and Nathanael were all part of that group of disciples. We can imagine that they were all relatively young - tradition holds that John was the youngest - and filled with a desire to change the world around them. They had heard the call of God to follow this dream that John proclaimed and into the midst of that gathering came one who was even greater than John the Baptizer. In St. John's sequence of events Jesus had been baptized, gone for his 40 days in the wilderness, and returned to the gathering at the Jordan in order for John the Baptizer to identify him as the Messiah. In today's reading the time has come for Jesus to return to Galilee and he asks Philip to join him. The only information we are given about Philip is that he came from the same home town as Peter and Andrew. Earlier Andrew had brought Peter (and presumably Philip) to meet Jesus and they spent time listening to Jesus speak about the Kingdom of God. What Jesus said was obviously pretty effective for these young people since, over the course of some weeks or months, they left John's group and followed Jesus. As we move into this season after Epiphany we will be reminded of some of the ways in which God

assembled a group of people who would be formed into a world changing group through the message and life of Jesus the Messiah.

The world is filled with people who have a passion for one thing or another and often that passion is directed toward something that needs to change. We have been reminded recently that there are also some passions that are not healthy or helpful to the world around us and so, I believe, it is important to examine the source of whatever passion we may have in order that it can be helpful rather than harmful. I believe that a passion to follow God and obey his commands will be helpful rather than harmful. As we read through scripture we discover that the 'calling' from God happens in a variety of ways. The prophet Samuel, for instance, was woken up in the middle of the night by a voice which he did not recognize but which the priest under whom he worked identified. The only life Samuel had known was as a helper at the Temple in Shiloh with Eli as the High Priest. Eli's sons were also priests there but they were wicked. Something needed to change and God chose Samuel to be the one to usher in that change. Over the course of many years Samuel would become identified as a voice from God to the people of Israel. He anointed kings and prayed for the people of Israel. Samuel modelled a commitment to the ways of God that generations of God's people have admired and remembered. This journey began when Samuel said, 'speak Lord, your servant is listening'. (1 Sam 3:10) Such is the beginning for everyone who has a passion to follow God and grow into the person they are meant to be - a simple 'yes'.

Sometimes that simple 'yes' results in fame and larger responsibilities the way it did with Samuel and Simon/Peter and sometimes that simple 'yes' results in mostly anonymous work on God's behalf the way it did with Philip and Nathanael. The 'yes' can be a public or private declaration, it can be made with or without information, it can even be half-hearted but it has the power to change lives and through those changed lives it can change the world. When Philip told Nathanael that they had found the Messiah and that he was Jesus from Nazareth Nathanael made the comment, 'can anything good come from Nazareth?' to which Philip replied, 'come and see'. Nathanael wasn't completely convinced but was willing to trust his friend to some degree. Through that half-hearted 'yes' Nathanael was brought face to face with Jesus the Messiah and his life was transformed. Jesus told him that he would see 'heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.' (John 1:51) We don't know exactly how that manifested itself in Nathanael's life but we do know he was named as one of the 12 apostles alongside his friend Philip. He would have been one of the 12 who was sent into the neighbouring villages on a mission trip during which they all witnessed God's work of healing and restoration and over which they all rejoiced. (Luke 9) He was present, we are told, in the upper room

when the Holy Spirit fell and they all began to speak in languages they did not know. He was among those who heard Jesus' command to 'go into all the world and make disciples of every nation, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded.' (Matthew 28:19,20) He didn't become as well known as St. Peter, St. John, or St. Paul but we believe he had an impact on the world around him because he said 'yes' when he was called.

Samuel, Philip, Nathanael, Peter, Andrew, John, and millions of others have said 'yes' to the call of God and have helped make the world a better place. They all stand as an example, and a challenge, for us as we face the troubles of this age. The world around us is not the way God wishes it to be but through the efforts of those who have said 'yes' to God the influence of the Kingdom of God becomes real in this world. The stories of the first disciples of Jesus are often dramatic and may not represent our own experience with God but they do contain some important things to remember. We probably each have a passion for something - some aspect of life that we are willing to spend our energies in trying to influence. It could be that you believe that young people need mentors so you volunteer as a coach or tutor to bring a wholesome and helpful element into the lives of some young people. It could be that you believe everyone should have access to food and so you volunteer your energies toward helping the food bank or soup kitchens to their work. It could be that you believe that knowledge of God and commitment to God's purposes can help restore lives that are broken and so you spend your efforts to proclaiming God's message and sharing the love of God with others. Our passions take us into areas we may not have expected and sometimes the work is noticed and other times the work is not noticed but we are called upon to say 'yes' to God's call. As we make our efforts to follow God may the world become an even better place. As he did with all the other disciples Jesus welcomed Nathanael into the circle. Even though Nathanael began with what we may call a half-hearted response Jesus' acceptance of him was complete. Jesus is waiting to welcome all of people into that circle and to strengthen those who have already been welcomed into the band of disciples. How we got there is not as important as what we do once we are there. May I encourage you to continue to say 'yes' to God in the midst of this pandemic so that "His newness of life may be shared in our homes, in our church, and throughout the community." (From the Diocesan Mission Statement)

O Lord, we beseech thee mercifully to receive the prayers of thy people which call upon thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP p. 123)