

Epiphany 2 B John 1:43-51 1 Samuel 3:1-10 Psalm 139 1-5, 12-17

Last Sunday Mother Elizabeth, preaching on the Baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan by John the Baptizer, hazarded the guess that being truly rocked by the Holy Spirit might well challenge our comfort zones as worshippers here at St. Andrew's.

From that guess she proceeded to widen and deepen our understanding of how we and indeed the whole world is sustained and blessed in the Holy Spirit.

Our gospel today brings us to a second reticence typical of Episcopalians and also known to be found at moments here at St. Andrew's.

Holy Spirit last Sunday, evangelism, there I said it right out loud, evangelism, today.

In the last decade and a half I have been a part of two attempts here to initiate some kind of evangelism action, and the result of each despite faithful efforts was something less than auspicious.

Why do we think that is, this supposed Episcopal reticence about evangelism?

I cannot speak for all Episcopalians, and certainly not for this community of faith. There are of course many reasons.

But I wonder this:

What if our reticence has to do with a flattened vision of what it is that we invite others consider when we say, as Phillip said to Nathaniel, "Come and see?"

I am reminded of the greatly influential book of decades past by J. B. Phillips titled, "Your God is too Small."

Could it be that our vision of God's embrace of this world and everything and everyone in it turns out to be too small, too puny, too contingent, too meager to compel us to share it?

Should this be the case, our lessons today challenge us to expand our vision of God as the giver and sustainer of our lives.

¹ Samuel - Boy Samuel/elder priest Eli In a day when visions were not widespread, Samuel experiences the call of God to him, "the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him."

But God initiates. Calls Samuel three times, and then appears before him.

In verses that follow: "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle."

Psalms 139. - God searches and knows us better than we know ourselves, is acquainted with all our ways. "Where can I go from your spirit?...Night as bright as the day."

John 1: 43-51 - When Nathanael registers surprise at what Jesus says about him, he asks, "Where did you get to know me?" And Jesus responds, "I saw you under the fig tree before Phillip called you."

The picture presented in these lessons: God present and active in life, taking initiative prior to any initiative of ours.

Epiphany season - to show, to show forth, to manifest

What if the kind of conversion we are offered in Epiphany, that compels us to show forth the love of God is not slick parish programs, not well honed tools and skills and methods, but rather to leave the humdrum of our sleepy perception of what God is up to, and pass as it were through the wardrobe as the children did in the C.S. Lewis novel *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, into the hidden, magical, wonder-filled, beautiful mystery of God whose love is constantly washing over the whole world.

A vision of God that makes those who find it tingle.

What if evangelizing has little to do with technique or leading questions or memorized responses or gut-wrenching gumption, and everything to do with how large and compelling and tingling and overflowing our apprehending is of the superabundant love of God?

What if the reason Jesus said "Follow me," and more importantly why Phillip was moved to invite Nathanael, was not to impress Jesus with how talented and earnest and successful an evangelist he was?

No, what if the reason why Phillip heard God calling in Jesus' invitation and decided to follow him, and the reason why Nathanael heard God calling in Phillip's invitation, "Come and See," what if it was because God's forgiving and abundant love was already pouring out, beginning to work within them, transforming them, making them new, awakening them, converting them to the love that was always there, even before they heard the call?

It is not that we have to act a certain way to be faithful evangelists that draw others
toward the heart of God.

It is something prior to and much larger than we in our reticent and hesitating overtures.
It is the prior presence of God in all of life, forgiving us and reconciling us and blessing us
that allows us to turn around and follow, to accept the healing presence of God.

What if it is not that we are waiting for God but that God is already present waiting for us,
waiting for the rich and powerful, for the one who is alienated from life, for the hugely
accomplished as well as for the one for whom life has been a series of false starts?
What if the necessary faith for any effort of inviting folks to “Come and See,” is the
conviction that God is present before we are?

It is God’s ever-present loving forgiveness that allows us to repent, to turn around. Our
repentance is simply God’s forgiving love working within us, leading us to accept and
embrace the healing presence of God.

We see this prior presence and patient love of God in Samuel’s experience where God
keeps on calling, three times in fact, before Samuel awakens from his slumbering life,
catches on, and answers the call.

And the writer of Psalm 139 gives us the same clue (vs. 1-2, 7, 9-10)

¹ O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

The Christian mystery of creation is the belief that at every single moment, God is calling
us into existence, holding us in existence.

God is more interior to you than you are to yourself, because at the very heart of your
being, moment by moment, minute by minute, God is there pouring out existence in
you.

My presence here in this pulpit is a very present act of God's presence, because moment
by moment, God is giving me my 'Georgeness', whatever for good or ill causes me to be
me.

Moment by moment the presence of God is at the heart of our being; God present in
every thing that is.

And the way God does that is by calling out into the heart of all things what they have it
in them to be, who it is that we have in us to be, calling as God called Samuel to live into
who he truly was, and showing the Psalmist the mystery of his life, the immense wonder
of his 'livingness.'

“Lord, you have searched me out and known me...Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?”

And when we misunderstood that, as not only the ancients did but we as well, and we do have a way of not getting it right, making it hard for us to become the truth of ourselves, then that word in whom and through whom God creates us and everything moment by moment, that word becomes present in time, as one of us, as a human being.

It is that One whose coming we have just celebrated at Christmas, who enters our broken and hurting world, and takes our condition into himself and unites it with the truth of ourselves in his cross and resurrection.

This One, Jesus who came among us, pours out within us the same Holy Spirit that filled and animated his whole being with the love of God, drawing us ever deeper into the heart of God.

As St. Paul offers: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.”

So, back to where we began this morning: the ministry of evangelism. I believe that it begins when we are captured, even overtaken by the vision of what God is up in this world and therefore with us.

It starts as we ourselves enter into the profound mystery of Christian faith and find that it makes us tingle at its enormity.

Evangelism depends on our knowing with our hearts what it is we are offering to our city
and to our world when we say, “Come and See.”

The gift of an evangelist is ours when we discover again and again that the God who had
formed us is already present, proceeding our endeavors as God was for Samuel and the
Psalmist and Phillip and Nathanael, calling us into a life and mission larger and richer
than we can imagine.