

2 Epiphany B 2021

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17

John 1:43-51

In violent times,
We reach for images of peace.
In leaderless times,
We remember our heroes.
When the future is uncertain,
We look to our prophets,
Not because they can tell us what will happen,
But because they show us what matters.

During our War of Independence,
It is said,
A favorite image,
Embroidered on samplers,
Remembered in speeches and sermons,
Planted in gardens,
Was the promise from Hebrew Scripture:
Each householder,
Under the vine and fig tree,
Shall live in peace and unafraid.
We reach, in times like this, for images of peace.

Right now
Our future is uncertain,
Even as we look with hope
Towards a peaceful transfer of power.
But multiple threats
Leave us anxious about the future.
And so we look to our prophets,
Who show us what matters.
Today we have three.

From our forerunners in faith,
The people Israel,
The witness of the prophet Samuel.
From the good news
That brings us to faith,
The call of Jesus.

And from our own history,
A history of violence and hope,

Our great prophet,
Martin Luther King.
His dream and his work,
His call to freedom by nonviolent action,
Cannot be undone,
Even by the violence we have just witnessed.
The arc of history
May not bend smoothly,
It may even falter for a moment,
But the promise does not fail.
The dream endures,
The work goes on,
The call is still clear.

But it takes courage,
And imagination,
And discipline to hear it.
And we need to hear it now.

The stories of scripture can help us.
Stories of listening and hearing,
Stories of finding and sharing,
Stories of insight and revelation.
Stories of call and response.

The story of the boy Samuel is charming
At first glimpse,
And fearful if you delve deeper.
In a time of sordid corruption,
When those in power
Ignored or discounted,
Or cannot hear the voice of God,
A little boy goes by night to a holy place,
Hoping for a word from the silent Holy One.
But when God speaks,
Samuel cannot understand.
Only when his master,
Finding within himself some memory of integrity,
Speaks truth, and helps him understand,
Does the little boy respond.
And in that moment,
the history of his people is realigned,
back on track,
moving – slowly, and not without betrayal and pain –
towards the vision of God.

From the moment when he first hears the voice of God,
Samuel becomes God's prophet,
Reminding the people of their history and hope,
Their vocation as God's chosen,
Delivered from slavery,
Entrusted with the precious gift of law.
Samuel speaks truth to power;
Sometimes by wise counsel,
Sometimes with harsh judgment.
Sometimes he upholds what is right.
Sometimes he overturns what is wrong.
He is relentless and compassionate,
Fully engaged in the drama of his people,
Fully alive to the voice of God.
That life of prophetic witness and action begins here,
In the story of his call.

And then there is the call of Nathanael,
The mystery disciple,
And his response to the news,
And then the voice,
Of the greatest prophet,
Who goes at first by the name
Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.

At first Nathanael deflects the news
Of the promised one
With a cynical, sophisticated dismissal.
But then,
The invitation to come and see
Lures him into the presence of Jesus,
Who sees him and knows him,
And offers him a promise
Beyond what he has dreamed.

How can we know this?
It's a subtle conversation in this gospel story,
A first glimpse of the sort of dialogue
That flowers into fullness
When Jesus encounters the woman at the well.

Nathanael starts out mocking Jesus,
Mistaking his place of origin
For his identity.
Jesus responds with greater irony –
A reminder that matching wits with Jesus

Is a fruitless enterprise.
Nathanael, who has been cynical,
Responds authentically,
Guilelessly, in fact.
He has been seen and known,
And he is, for a moment,
Lost in wonder.
And that is only the beginning.
His journey begins under the fig tree,
And continues
with the stairway to heaven.

What about that fig tree?
It's distracting if we don't understand it,
Enhances the meaning of the call if we do.
So let's sit under the fig tree for just a moment.

The fig tree, remember,
Is a sign of peace and safety.
We will live under our vine and fig tree,
Scripture says,
In peace and unafraid.
For the people of Jesus,
Peace and security meant freedom,
Freedom to do the most desirable thing –
Study the precious word of God
In the Torah.
In the time of Jesus,
To be under the fig tree
Meant to be engaged in the joy
Of studying the word of God.
And then, for Nathanael,
The word of God comes walking into his life,
Teacher and friend
And keeper of the promise.

The new world Nathanael enters here
Holds more than the word
Revealed in scripture.
He is promised a vision of heaven.
That image, the ladder into heaven,
that glimpse of glory,
Appears first to Jacob – the wily one –
Full of guile –
Who becomes Israel,
Wily and yet wonderstruck

By the glory he will never comprehend.
But the glory enters the story,
Again and again.

The glory flames forth for Moses
In the burning bush
And leads the people into freedom
As a pillar of fire.
Then that glory
is a promise to Nathanael,
and to everyone who catches sight of Jesus
and turns towards him,
hears the invitation to come and see,
and follows.
Nathanael begins his day
Under the fig tree
Engaged in the work that brings him joy
And ends his day
Gathered into the fullness of that joy
In the presence and person,
the promised glory of the Holy One.

Why does any of this storytelling matter,
In a time of such urgency?

Because these stories offer us ways of seeing, knowing,
And becoming.
Stories that we will need,
In the days to come.
People we will need to be,
In the days to come.
Disciples.

Discipleship
Is not a popular word
In a tradition and a parish like ours.

And yet,
If we are not formed as disciples,
We will be deformed
By the spirit of the times.
There is violence and hatred
All around us.
There is corruption and a willful deafness
To the voice, the stirring of the Holy One.

Only conscious, courageous allegiance
To the way of Jesus,
The way of love,
Will keep us from sinking under the weight
Of sorrow and despair.
We have allies and friends
Who follow other ways.
We stand together with them,
And journey with them on the way.

For us, the way is the way of Jesus of Nazareth,
The Holy One of God.
Only a faithful effort to be and act as his disciples
Will nurture the dream
And bring it closer, sooner, now,
Even now, in this fearful time.

Our great prophet,
Martin Luther King,
Warned that if we succumbed to the temptation
To meet violence with violence,
Our legacy to the future
Would be meaningless chaos.

Without our dreams,
Our prophets,
And the presence of God with us,
We would succumb.
With our dreams,
Our prophets,
And the presence of God with us,
We will, we shall –
Overcome;
We will weather these times,
We will do our part
To foster hope
And nurture those efforts
That lead to the renewing of the world.

Nathanael,
As you may know,
Vanishes into the story.
He is not named again until the end,
The end that is a new beginning.
He is the mystery disciple.

That means he leaves an open space,
Where you or I or anyone can enter.
Maybe his story is not your story.
But there is a place for you
In the story.
And a new chapter begins now.