

**Second Sunday after Epiphany  
(The Second Sunday in Ordinary Time)**

**I Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139; John 1:43-51; I Corinthians 6:12-20**

In Luke 8:10, Jesus tells about people who, “seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand” (ESV). Paul the Apostle refers to the same phenomenon when he writes, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (I Cor. 2:14). This is the subject of the four scriptures that make up the lectionary for the Second Sunday after Epiphany.

**I Samuel 3:1-10** is the story of the first experience of the young lad, Samuel, in hearing God’s word to him. But the story is far more profound than that, if one does a careful reading of the text.

“Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days” (3:1). We learn from this introduction that “the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord” – that is, that he was fulfilling priestly functions under the supervision of the high priest, Eli (cf. 2:18). We do not know how old Samuel was in this story, but the implications are that he was a lad who had not yet entered adolescence. In this story, Samuel’s vocation is expanded from being one who exercises priestly functions to one who is called to be a prophet (a prophet being defined as one who hears and shares the word of the Lord). Later, in I Samuel 7, his vocation will be expanded still further when he is called to exercise the office of the judge of Israel.

What is most significant about this passage, however, is the statement that follows the description of Samuel. “The word of the Lord was rare in those days”. God, this text is telling us in the often understated way that is so Jewish, is withholding His word from Israel. Such withholding of the word of the Lord is a sign of God’s displeasure, whereas hearing and speaking the word is a sign of His favor (cf. 14:37; Ps. 74:8; Lam. 2:9).

But, the text is quick to add, “The lamp of God had not yet gone out (in the tabernacle)” (3:3). This is a metaphorical statement, not a statement of literal reality. God’s presence in the tabernacle and in the midst of His people has not yet been snuffed out. Rather, Samuel’s presence still brings a flicker of hope to believers that God has one in their midst who is committed enough to be the vehicle of God’s word to them.

The stage is now set for God to act. As Samuel was lying down at night, waiting for sleep to come, he hears a voice, “Samuel, Samuel”. Thinking it is Eli calling, Samuel arises and goes to Eli to respond to the call, only to discover that Eli had not called him. He returns to his bed, only to have the same process repeated two more times. Eli finally realizes that it may be God who is calling Samuel, instructs him to respond, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” Samuel obediently follows Eli’s instructions, and God speaks the prophetic word to Samuel. The word of the Lord is no longer rare in those days!

There are two significant truths captured in this story, symbolized in the persons of Eli and Samuel. Eli was the high priest – the servant of God responsible for bringing the people of Israel

before God for confession of sin, redemption and blessing. He did that priestly task faithfully. But the text also tells us that he had poor eyesight (3:2). I would suggest that Eli's blindness was not only physical; it was spiritual, as well. He could not readily perceive God at work in Israel's midst (1:12-18) and therefore could not produce a people who were spiritually discerning or obedient to God (2:12-17). The difficulty Eli had in perceiving that what Samuel was hearing was God speaking is an indication of his spiritual obtuseness. One could say that Eli was faithful in his service of God, but he was not one who was in any kind of discernible relationship with God or spiritually discerning. He was like those religious leaders who are committed to the institution of the Church, but have no discernible relationship with the Lord of the Church. He was one who "seeing did not see, and hearing did not understand".

Samuel provides an alternative to Eli. And that is why it was Samuel who was called beyond priesthood to the offices of prophet and judge, while Eli was not so called. Before this nighttime event, Samuel was likely no more relational with God than was Eli. After all, he was a priest not because he chose so to be, but because his mother made a vow that he would be a priest and had placed him in the service of the tabernacle (1:11, 24-28). But when God spoke to him, Samuel responded, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening". And, indeed, he was truly and fully listening.

So God spoke to Samuel and commanded him to do what he did not want to do (3:10-14). But he did it nonetheless, proving his obedience to God's word (3:15-4:1). What is crucial in this story about Samuel, and what differentiates him from Eli, is that he is open to God's word, hears it and acts upon it (3:10). The Word is the important reality in this story. It is what God is all about. That word which once spoken, had created the world; that word which would one day redeem the world, had now come to Samuel. And Samuel had responded, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening!"

**Psalm 139** is the psalm for the Second Sunday after Epiphany. And it has to be one of the most profound and insightful psalms in the Psalter.

This psalm begins with the penetrating words, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away" (139:1-2).

With these opening lines, the Psalmist introduces his theme – God's omniscient and utterly loving relationship to us. God knows us through and through because he has created us and loves us with the deepest, giving love – whether we respond to that love or not.

The Psalmist then declares several things about our relationship with God. First, we cannot escape from God or his love – whether we are in heaven or in hell, the limits of the earth or of the universe, the extremes of night or day (139:7-12). God sees right through them – and us! "Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as day" (vs. 12).

Second, there is nothing we can do, think or be that will surprise God. He knows us fully because God created us. He knew us when we were only "unformed substance". He "knit us

together in our mother's womb". He determined the length of our life, and the substance of that life – even before the first day of that life occurred (vss. 13-18).

Third, God knows our attitudes and actions toward others. He knows of our hatreds, our loathing of those who loath God. And he knows we know of that amazing love God, even of those who loathe God so that he will not act against them as we might, if we were God (vss. 19-22).

So, before such an awesome, remarkable, holy and loving God, how can we respond? There is only one way.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (vss. 23-24)!

Psalm 139 is such an overwhelming and moving psalm, because it so beautifully describes the overwhelming and moving God whom we worship and adore!

**John 1:43-51** is the account of Jesus' call of Philip and Nathanael to become his disciples. The previous day, Jesus had called Andrew and Simon Peter to discipleship (1:35-42), and now was following up with Philip<sup>1</sup>.

It took only two words spoken by Jesus to get Philip's response: “Follow me” (vs. 43). That was enough for Philip, who not only responded with enthusiasm but immediately sought out his friend, Nathanael, to excitedly declare, “We (that is, Andrew, Peter and he) have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth” (vs. 45). In his response to Nathanael, Philip has demonstrated that discipleship to Jesus is not passive, but active. It is not simply sitting at Jesus' feet, receiving wisdom and new insights from him. It also includes an active response, a movement out into the world, sharing the good news and working for the transformation of the world around one.

Nathanael demonstrates that he is a much “harder fish to catch”. His response to Philip's excited report was “Can anything good come out of Nazareth” (vs. 46)?

The attention of the text then shifts from Peter, Andrew and Philip to Nathanael. Nathanael, in his caustic response to Philip, is simply mirroring the skepticism of his contemporaries that a prophet could arise from Galilee – and particularly from as insignificant and unimportant a town as Nazareth. His response reveals that, to him as well as to most Jews of his day, the perception was that a prophet had to arise from the center of Israel's economic, religious and political power – Jerusalem, and not from the margins. But by making that assumption, they were already

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<sup>1</sup> Philip likely had a relationship with Andrew and Simon Peter, because the text tells us, “Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter” (1:44) and Jesus' meeting with the three men, one-by-one, occurred in “Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing” (1:28). Bethsaida was in the far northern region of Galilee, east of the Jordan River while Bethany was near the wilderness in Judea, around 100 miles south of Bethsaida. It seems likely that Simon Peter, Andrew and Philip (and perhaps Nathanael, too) had all journeyed from northern Galilee to see John the Baptist, and had then been introduced by John to Jesus who then called the four men, one-by-one, to follow him.

ignoring the reality of the proclamation of John who had come out of the wilderness prophesying the coming of the Messiah!

Philip's response to Nathanael was not to argue with him, or match debate point to debate point. He simply both witnesses to Jesus and to challenge his friend with the word, "Come and see" (vs. 46)! Come and see for yourself, Nathanael. Come, and have eyes that see and ears that hear, rather than being like our leaders who have eyes that cannot see and ears that cannot hear (John 9:39-41).

Well, Nathanael does "come and see". He comes with skepticism, looking for reasons either to believe or not to believe. He comes testing and suspicious, but open to considering the evidence and to changing his mind. Nathanael comes as a skeptical inquirer, a seeker after truth.

And he finds Truth. When Nathanael is introduced to Jesus by Philip, Jesus gives a strange greeting: "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael's response is quizzical, "Where did you get to know me" (or, in other words, "What is it you know about me that causes you to respond in this way?")? Jesus then replies, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you" (vs. 48).

What had Jesus seen? We don't know. This is an exchange between Nathanael and Jesus from which we are excluded. But obviously, something had happened "under the fig tree" that demonstrated clearly the honesty and openness of Nathanael. What had happened (whatever it might be) was known only to Nathanael. And now, he discovered that Jesus knew about it, also.

Jesus' response displayed his supernatural knowledge to Nathanael so convincingly that this friend of Philip's is overwhelmed with the realization that this man is, indeed, exactly whom Philip said that he was. Nathanael immediately responds, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel" (vs. 49)! The titles Nathanael uses for Jesus demonstrate how greatly he has been convinced. "Son of God" was a popular title that Gentiles primarily used at the time for a ruler of such wisdom and discernment that his voice could be perceived only as that of a god and not of a mere man (cf. Acts 12:20-23). The title, "King of Israel" was the Hebrew title for the Messiah, used at the Triumphal Entry (12:13), the announcement of the wise men (Matt. 2:2) and the inscription on the cross (19:19). Nathanael had come to Jesus looking for reasons either to believe or disbelieve, and Jesus' supernatural knowledge of him is sufficient to convince him. Thus, we discover that Nathanael is not only a man of no deceit; he is also one who has eyes to see and ears to hear what the Spirit has to say to him!

**I Corinthians 6:12-20** is Paul's insight on the relationship between our convictions and our actions as Christians. Apparently, a number of the Christians in Corinth have undiscerningly embraced the Greek belief of that day that was an adaptation of Platonist philosophy that resulted in a profound demarcation between the body and the spirit that gave permission for unreflective license. Plato had taught that the only important world was the world of the mind, the world of thought, reflection and meditation. Therefore, to seek and to reflect upon Truth, Beauty and Goodness was the ultimate aim in life. Jewish people would understand Truth by pointing to a truthful man or Beauty by discovering a beautiful woman. Body and spirit were directly related

to each other, and both were embraced by understanding the other. Platonists, on the other hand, saw a significant dichotomy between thought and action, with the world of reflection, debate and discussion being the “really real” world – the world that truly mattered. Thus, by the middle of the first century, the Christians in Corinth who had lived much of their pre-Christian lives in the embrace of Platonist philosophy had carried that philosophy into their understanding of Christian faith. Therefore, they saw nothing wrong with satisfying bodily urges as long as they centered their thoughts in Christ. Thus, they saw nothing wrong with sexual union with a prostitute, because since that act was only physical, it would not affect their relationship with Christ. This, in turn, had led to a dichotomized church in which people saw no relationship between their actions and their spiritual formation.

Paul’s response to such thinking was decisive. In this passage, he begins by quoting a statement these Corinthian Christians declared in order to defend their actions, “All things are lawful for me.” Paul in essence replies, “That may be true, but just because something is lawful doesn’t make it beneficial either to you or the church” (6:12). What Paul is stating is that, as a forgiven, cleansed Christian, all things may be permissible. But that doesn’t mean that it will build the common good. There are many things that it is perfectly legal for us to do that we will not choose to do because doing them will have a negative impact upon someone else. Thus, in another place in his first letter to the Corinthian Church (8:1-13), Paul argues, “There is no legal reason why one should not eat meat offered to idols. After all, meat is meat! But if my eating meal offered to idols offends a Christian, I shouldn’t eat it – not because it is wrong to eat such meat, but because it hurts that Christian.” An action may be permissible. But it might not build the Body of Christ; it might not serve the common good. Therefore, you don’t do it!

But this matter of sexual immorality, justified by an appeal to Platonist philosophy, is far worse. It is not only not beneficial. It *is* not permissible. It may not be against Roman and Greek law. But it is against the Law of God!

You are the Body of Christ, Paul argues – not just as a community of faith, but as individuals (vs. 14). You are the physical manifestation of Jesus alive today. What are you doing, then, when you go and have sexual relations with a prostitute? You are joining Jesus to that woman! Your actions are a witness against the gospel. Instead of calling the city of Corinth to a higher, Godlier way of life, you are endorsing their sexual immorality and dishonoring Christ by participating in it (vss. 15-17).

Paul then concludes his argument with the primary point he wants to make. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body” (vss. 19-20). The Church, Paul teaches elsewhere (Eph. 2:19-22) is a community of believers, God’s people who are like a holy temple or a spiritual house. Here Paul takes that concept and applies it to individuals. If the Church is God’s temple, then so are you God’s temple. Think what you are doing when you take God’s temple and then join it with a prostitute!<sup>2</sup> You are compromising Christ! In fact, you are prostituting Christ! And you are making a mockery of the gospel.

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<sup>2</sup> To capture the full force of Paul’s argument here, one must recognize that the prostitutes of Corinth were all temple prostitutes. That is, the center of prostitution in Corinth was the temple of the goddess of love, Aphrodite. The people of Corinth believed that it was an act of worship of Aphrodite to have sexual intercourse with a priestess

So, repent! Have eyes that see, ears that hear. Discern reality for what it actually is. And begin living truly as “Christ one’s” – Christians – in the world!

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of Aphrodite (whether you were male or female). Thus, what Paul is arguing is that the Christian is a “temple” of the Holy Spirit. If you take that “temple” to the temple of Aphrodite and there engage in sexual intercourse with a priestess of Aphrodite (and there are no other prostitutes in Corinth), then all who see you at that temple and know you are a Christian view your sexual relationship with an Aphrodite priestess as symbolically linking Jesus and Aphrodite in sexual intercourse! Do you really want to do that, just to satisfy your own carnal pleasure?