

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Brett Gibson

"Knowing Our Call"

1 Samuel 3

January 17, 2021

We don't need to rehearse all the turmoil that's going on in the world. We're inundated by news of crises: local, national, and international; political and partisan; public health and ecological; racial and violent. And then, there are the crises that don't make the evening news: the personal, the private, the emotional and psychological crises; the crises on the other side of the world we will never hear of. No, we don't need to rehearse our world's turmoil.

What I'd like us to rehearse instead is who we are, who we are called to be. That's the sort of rehearsal we regularly need, perhaps as regularly as weekly. We need to rehearse who we are, who we are called to be because of all these other nightly, hourly, late-breaking rehearsals.

As one of our great baptist theologians James McClendon said, we all exist "as in a tournament of narratives." So many stories, articulations about what is true, about what is good, about what is beautiful, about what is false, about what is evil, about what is ugly. As followers of the Way of Jesus, we're called to tell and to embody an alternative story, an alternative articulation about truth, goodness, and beauty. In fact, I think that's one way to think about what a church is: a church is, at least, a group of people who gather around Jesus and rehearse together how to embody the truth, goodness, and beauty of Jesus in the world.

The story from 1 Samuel 3 is a familiar one to many of us. The young Samuel is sleeping in the tabernacle. He hears his name called and, assuming it is the priest Eli, and so he runs to him. This happens three times, until blind Eli finally "sees;" Eli perceives. It is the Lord calling the boy. This episode is often referred to as the calling of Samuel, but the story technically, literarily misses most of the markers for the traditional call narratives in the Old Testament. What's happening here is less about the Lord calling Samuel to a task, and more what's known as a "theophany," like what happens to Moses on Mount Sinai or to the disciples at the transfiguration. It is a revelation, a manifestation, an uncovering of God to a human being.

It's what we celebrate in this liturgical season that we call the season after Epiphany. Epiphany is a time of reflection on the willingness of Jesus not only to come, but to be revealed to us. In Advent we wait for Christ. At Christmas, we celebrate that Christ has come. At Epiphany, we celebrate that Christ was revealed and made known to the world. You see, God could have sent Jesus incognito--just some anonymous blood donor sent to effect our salvation. N. T. Wright is fond of pointing out that, for many Christians, it would have sufficed (following the language of the creeds) for Jesus to have been born of a virgin...and then to have suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, died, and buried. These kinds of Christians Dallas Willard called "vampire Christians": those who are only interested in Jesus for his blood (*The Divine Conspiracy*, 403 n. 8) But the Gospel writers don't jump from Jesus' birth narrative to his passion. They spill much ink to give us a picture of the life of Jesus between the cradle and the cross. This is what Epiphany declares to us: that Jesus made himself known to us; that God wants to be *known* not

just believed in; that Jesus is not just an instrument of God but is *true Life* sent into the world; that the gospel is not just about the magnificence of the incarnation or the resurrection, but is also about the manifestation of God in a human life.

In the story of Samuel, the theophany occurs to a person ensconced in the trappings of religion, literally sleeping in the heart of the temple. He's ministering under the priest of Yahweh. He knows all about God and the functioning of the house of God, but he doesn't yet know God. The irony: he lies down directly next to the ark of the covenant, the physical presence of Yahweh on earth, yet he cannot recognize God's voice. Is it possible this early in the history of Israel for the temple already to have become a museum instead of a home for the living, speaking God?

The constant temptation for the Christian is to be satisfied with knowledge about God over an actual encounter with God, to sacrifice being with God for reading about God. We study about God; we love our Bible studies; we listen to sermons; we talk about God. But how often do we actually set aside time to be with God? This is why a practice of prayer is so important: because prayer is an intentional being with God...and there is no substitute for it. Prayer approaches God not as an object to be studied but as a person to know. The life with Christ is not composed simply of knowledge about God. Now of course, knowledge about God is important. Right teaching about God is one of the chief tasks of the church; we cannot rely solely on experience. But right teaching should never be seen as a substitute for the actual encounter of God. A little experience of God is worth more than mountains of knowledge about God. It's the difference between knowing the rules and history and traditions of baseball and actually playing the game. It's the difference between reading a travel book about Paris and sitting in a café on the Champs-Élysées. It's the difference between knowing your wife loves a home cooked meal on her birthday and actually enjoying the meal with her.

The psalmist says, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." We've too often substituted the feast for the cookbook. The cookbook is important: but don't forget the purpose of preparing food. We should have an expectation as followers of Jesus of knowing God, not just knowing about God. It is in prayer, we seek to experience God, to spend time with God, to tune our ears to hear God speak our names.

The Gospel lection gives us the story of Philip and Nathanael. Philip tells Nathanael they've found the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote. Nathanael is skeptical: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip, the true friend, the one who here models for us a life of the most hospitable evangelism, simply responds, "Come and see." Such warm words, words of invitation that stretch across the millennia, that summon anyone who might be interested in knowing Jesus: come and see.

It was easy enough for Nathanael to "come and see;" it takes a bit more work for us. The invitation for Nathanael, as for us, isn't come learn some facts or come read some books or come watch a presentation. The invitation is to come and see Jesus. Christians today are invited again and again: come and see, come and see.

In 2007, a non-descript man walks down into a Washington DC metro station; white t-shirt, jeans, ball cap, he's carrying a violin case. He stands next to the wall, opens the case, and pulls out the violin. He shrewdly puts in a few bucks to give passersby the right idea, then he starts playing. He plays for 43 minutes: classical type pieces: Mozart and Schubert, stuff like that. It's morning rush hour, so in those 43 minutes, 1,097 people passed by. Of those, 27 people collectively gave him \$32. Three nights before, the violinist, Joshua Bell, had played the Boston Symphony Hall, where the cheap seats were \$100 each. Joshua Bell is considered one of the world's greatest concert violinists at 39, a child prodigy who honed his craft to near perfection. The violin he's playing on: a Stradivarius worth over \$3 million: one of the most valuable instruments in the world. Over 1,000 people passed by without taking even a hint of a notice.

In prayer, we stop and listen. We come and see. We push away every distraction to attend to what is most life-giving, most beautiful, most important.

Don't think I've forgotten the crises I mentioned at the beginning. You know, those crises we aren't rehearsing this morning. What does the experience of God through prayer have to do with all the problems of our world? Tertullian said, "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?" How is our practice of attending to God more than mere holy navel gazing?

When Richard Foster opened his great little book on Christian spiritual practice called *Celebration of Discipline*, he made this statement: "The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people." When we have true encounters with the true God, we are shaped for participation with God in the world. When we experience what it means to be the beloved children of God, we are then freed to participate in revealing the belovedness of other people. The reconciled become reconcilers. Disciples become those who make disciples. The one on whom the Light of Christ has shone become themselves the light of the world. We become a true testimony to the transforming power of God.

As Barbara Brown Taylor has said, "There is no reason why anyone should ever believe our talk of God's transforming power unless they can also see that transformation taking place in us—and through us, in the world... We are the people God has chosen to embody the Gospel. Our lives are God's sign language in a sin-sick world, and God has promised us the grace we need to point the way home." (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin*, 68).

In this season of Epiphany, let us tune our ears to hear God speak our names and draw us to himself so we can truly pray "Lord Christ, thank you for showing yourself to us, now show yourself through us."

Amen.