

I Samuel 13:1-10; John 1:43-51
“From a Fig Tree to Heavenly Visions”
January 14, 2018, 2018
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I’m so glad to see all of you here this morning. Of course, I’m always glad to see you, but today I’m especially glad because we have two wonderful Bible passages this morning. First, that delightful exchange in First Samuel between the old man, Eli, and the young boy, Samuel. Their relationship was set up long before when Samuel’s mother, Hannah, finally had a child after years of being barren. Sound biblically familiar? As a Levite on duty in the Temple, Eli happened to see her fervently praying for a child and blessed her. In gratitude of becoming pregnant, Hannah promised to give the child in the service to God. Talk about parental control to get a kid in church! Their story today describes them years later in a night-long tutorial.

The gospel reading is equally rich. It’s John’s description of Jesus’ calling of the first disciples, starting with Phillip and quickly moving to his hometown friends, Nathaniel, Andrew and Peter. The scene is somewhere in Galilee under a fig tree. The conversation goes between the friends and Jesus, mentioning geography and heavenly visions. Two great stories, each holding wisdom and truth.

I struggled to choose which one to focus on. At first gaze, they seem so different. In one, there’s the wisdom of an elder and the freshness of youth. There’s the metaphor of darkness and the mystery of voices in tension with the stability and tradition of the temple. But the gospel story seems quite opposite. Phillip and his cohort are not innocent, playing out their mother’s promise. They know the risks and rewards of the fishing trade. Also, their story with Jesus occurs in daylight.

The backdrop is a living fig tree, not a Temple’s carved, quarried blocks of cold hard stones. No groping in a dark, interior passageway, but an excited and urgent movement as Phillip passes on Jesus’ invitation “Come and see”.

The conversations in each story are different too. Eli and Samuel keep repeating essentially the same words, like a litany: “Here I am, for you called me” to which Eli responds, “No, I didn’t call you, my son, lie down again.” Nothing like what’s reported in John’s gospel. That conversation is a continuous dialogue. Jesus begins with Phillip who carries the message to Nathaniel where it momentarily stops before coming back to Jesus in a lively, honest exchange, drawing attention beyond fig trees.

You can see my dilemma. Which one to explore this morning? Which one to choose? So, in the end, I accepted the challenge of holding on to the differences and taking a deeper, second look. By not staying with the opposites, I discovered a deeper connection between the two. Both stories tell of people like us searching for a relationship with God and open enough to learn and move to new ideas and experiences. Both stories tell us what attending to our spiritual life, our inner life, might look, feel and be like. By staying open and looking deeper rather than dividing and excluding, this is what I see in the story of Eli and Samuel.

Eli is a spiritual mentor working with novice Samuel until Samuel understands that his spiritual life is his spiritual life. Throughout the night, Samuel keeps turning to Eli. When Samuel can't sleep, he gets up to find someone else.

Does that happen to you when you are restless, when your plans and your life stir you? Do you find someone, something to fix you? Read a book? Plan a party? Even do a hated task to get your mind off what's stirring inside you? Samuel tries to find someone. Wonderfully, his "Eli" isn't biting. "Go back", Eli keeps saying. "Stay with the Spirit within you. Do your own work."

Inner spiritual work can't be given away. I know. I tried. I wanted a spiritual life, at first, mainly because the church kept telling me I needed to have one. Yet, I also admit some vague longing on my own. So, I listened to different prayer methods suggested by people I admired. I kept running to "Eli" but my search always ended with running to another "Eli". Then, I decided to actually listen to a spiritual director, another "Eli". She gave me a book to read on "centering prayer". I read it, came to the next session and tossed the book on the rug between us. I picked up a legal pad and pen, and announced I was finally ready for her to tell me how to start doing centering prayer. Silence first answered me. Then she gently said with a slightly puzzled voice, "You simply do it." Inner work can't be given away. "Your servant is listening."

So, with Eli and Samuel's story in my heart, I was surprised when I gave the gospel story another look. It wasn't Jesus' invitation "Follow me" that drew my attention. This time Nathaniel spoke to me. Remember the moment? Here comes Phillip, all excited to share what's happened to him with his friend. Remember what Nathaniel says? "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Like "Where is he coming from? Can this Jesus be any good?"

We all know that response, don't we? Our minds naturally first go to judgement and differentiation. That's how we learn to survive and, to some extent, to thrive. From birth on, we size up what's out there, be it surroundings or people. "Can anything good..." could sum it all up - if we also include what's unspoken: "good for me and mine". Not surprisingly, Jesus see through it. Doesn't God always? None of our fig trees are ever far from God's loving gaze. Think about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden trying to hide from God behind fig leaves. Never works. Never works because that's not the relationship with God we are created to have, one of judgement and differentiation. That is not the loving, abundant life Jesus offers to Nathaniel, to us, all creation. Jesus is inviting us to a fuller, deeper, expansive, eternal life. This particular time Jesus describes it this way: "You will see greater things than these. Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Jesus invites Nathaniel to follow and learn to see beyond human divisions so even heaven and earth become one - just as God has begotten in Jesus.

This call to follow the path God creates in Jesus is exactly where Jesus is leading first Phillip, then Nathaniel, and Andrew and Peter, and all would dare follow. I say "dare" because we have to stop sitting under our fig tree and separating life in our dualistic minds. I say "dare" because the only way I have learned to stop living from my first, surface, trained reactive mind is to practice my own inner spiritual life. Just as Samuel learned in his own dark inner temple how to finally and deeply listen. Just as Nathaniel learned to trust life beyond his first knee-jerk response to suspect and pigeonhole.

Jesus invites us to follow him into a life of listening more deeply and seeing more fully. Jesus invites us to listen, see and love as he did - beyond the surface into the depths of ourselves and others, a place we discover when we take Jesus' invitation seriously and follow him. AMEN