

Sermon: *Is God Still Speaking*
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 1.14.24

This is the season of Epiphany. Sandwiched in between the season of Christmas and Lent, can anything good come out of this short season? Using today's Gospel language, I'll tell you this: come and see.

Epiphany is a time of new growth, of new light, of learning. Today's reading is about the prophet Samuel. It's a unique story because he is young and yet it follows a traditional Jewish style of story telling with something that repeats three times – God calls to Samuel, he thinks it's his master Eli, he wakes up Eli, he is told to go back to bed; three times. Then, Eli realizes it's God and tells young Samuel to respond to God next time (and to let him sleep for goodness sake!).

Samuel's call from God – and God not giving up on him but being persistent – leads us to ask the following question: Is God still speaking and calling us?

There is a particular Christian faith tradition that says that God stopped speaking as soon as the Bible was written. The Bible is the Word of the Lord so there is no reason for God to be calling to us today, or raising up prophets, or giving us new understanding of things; why, because it's already been said. I appreciate their approach and their reliance on God's word. Yet, my experience, my faith and how I understand it, is that God is still speaking; God is still calling; and that when God speaks it is a visible, or tangible, thing – not just a whisper in the middle of the night in one's ear. When God speaks, it is visible.

To tell you more about this I'd like to tell you about my own call to the priesthood. It's not a part of our Episcopal tradition to speak about such matters but, on the other hand, we have a tangible, visible system or process of ordination where we do talk about such matters. In that process, we share our story with a priest, who then listens and prays and then shares it with a few others. They form a discernment group. They then share the story with the Bishop who listens and prays and then either says for the group to continue or to stop. If continuing, the discernment group continues to listen, to pray, to ask questions and the one seeking ordination continues to document what is happening in his or her life. After a while, that group sends their findings to a diocesan group (who is unfamiliar with the person seeking ordination) and they review, listen, pray and discern if the person is being called. Then, that person goes to some formal training; usually seminary; and then the diocesan group reviews even more information – from professors and internship directors – to confirm what they believe is already happening; that the person is being called. The bishop is then brought in and if he or she agrees, an ordination date is set and then... we never ever talk about it again! I'd like to stop that trend and tell you about my call.

When I was twelve years old, I was confirmed in the Episcopal Church at All Saint's Tacoma (shout out to All Saints!). When Bishop Cochrane laid his hands on my head (which is tradition for confirmation) I felt/heard/saw the Spirit – I was shown; like a movie reel with individual frames that head out into the unknown; that another Bishop was going to lay his hands on my

head. After the confirmation service, and during the coffee hour reception, I asked my priest, Fr. Barry Winn, this question: what does it mean when the Holy Spirit says another bishop will lay his hands on my head? He replied, At your ordination!! (He was very excited) And then life stepped in and I ran from it.

When I was in my early thirties, and in a cold hotel room in western Russia, I had a dream – like Samuel who recalls that the Lord stood next to him while he was sleeping and called his name – Jesus was in my dream, called my name, and asked if I was done running and ready to follow him. He had my attention; everything else in my life was stripped away, it was just him and me, just like at my confirmation. This was the beginning.

As I said, there are physical, or visible ways of God speaking – not just in dreams or in thoughts. At the church where I was “raised up to the priesthood” the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection, Spokane Valley, I served on the altar as an acolyte. Whether on the altar or in the congregation, every time I was there, I couldn’t get the idea out of my head of what I would preach on that Sunday. Our rector, Brian Prior, who later became the Bishop of Minnesota, is a very good preacher; one of the best I have been around. Despite his engaging, thoughtful and relevant sermons, I could not help but ponder what God would have me say. As some of you have pointed out, I do have a gift of preaching; it has been with me for as long as I can remember. That gift made going to church more and more uncomfortable as the years went on. I went to a different church tradition; it was still there. I went to a Russian church; it was still there. God does not give up.

A more visible story, or mark of calling, was one day at the grocery store, the cashier reached her hand across to mine, held it and said that her husband is doing much better. Christi (my wife) asked in the car what that was all about. I told her that a week or two earlier, when I was shopping, this cashier told me about how her husband was injured and she was worried about him. After telling her the story, Christi had a surprised look on her face. She said, “This doesn’t normally happen to people.” But, truth be told, she had witnessed it happening to me time and time again. I have always had a spirit of listening – where people will share with me what is going on in their lives. I thought that everyone did that; and, well, apparently not.

Another mark of mission is that now, and before I was ordained, I bring joy to ordained people. This happened with Episcopal ministers – which I got kind of used to. Then, one day, I found myself in a deep conversation with a Lutheran pastor. At the end of the conversation he said this was the most joy in ministry he had felt within a few years. And, oddly enough, I have spoken with clerics outside of the Christian tradition who have also shared with me the joy they felt while talking with me.

There are some other stories of laying hands on people and them getting better but I’ll hold those stories for another time.

These are visible things that happen that show that God is still calling and that God is still speaking. One thing I need to tell you is that these stories, and especially those in the Bible, look like we understand and see what God is up to in real time. I can tell you from experience, we only understand when God is speaking, or has acted, when looking at the rearview mirror (metaphorically speaking). We'd love to see what God is up to looking through the proverbial windshield but that's not how God does it. We see it only in the rearview mirror. At the time, I didn't know God was healing the cashier's husband, but God was up to something. I only found out afterwards and, frankly, it was much further afterwards because it only came to light when Christi asked, "What was that all about?!" I don't know that people are being healed on the spot, I only find out afterwards. We see only in the rearview mirror. That's how it happened for Samuel too. And for Moses and Peter and all the rest. The action, the speaking and calling, happened and then later they made sense of it and realized God was there.

Is God speaking to you in your life?

I can tell you that I am seeing something that God is up to but it's not quite in the rearview mirror yet so I can't make sense of it; but, it is happening. I have three stories. First, the coffee hour today is being hosted today by the Marshall family. Christi and I have made you some ham and swiss cheese sliders. They are baking as I am talking to. The rolls and the ham are leftovers from the Epiphany party. We had a bunch of leftovers and I was not sure what to do. Christi looked at them and said we can make sliders. The butter, which is melted with Worcestershire sauce, stone ground mustard and brown sugar, and then baked into the rolls so they are a little sticky and sweet as well as hammy and swiss cheesy... yum. The butter is left over from the scones for the Christmas Tea party. The aluminum tray pans that they are being baked in are from the Spring Fling (we saw them and thought we can clean them for use later). How is God speaking through this? All of these ingredients are repurposed from something else to make this new treat. In other words, God is making all things new. I don't entirely know what this means but it sounds a little biblical – we're creating something new from things that were left over.

Secondly, I got this thank you note from Chuck Henry, the Senior Warden from St. George's Episcopal Church in Bradenton, Florida (they are near the Target in Bayshore Gardens). Chuck wrote: *thank you for the donation of your blue parish hall chairs. We are using them for our growing Food Pantry program and our many AA/NA meetings. We are very thankful for your gift, we need them and you provided them.*

You know that we bought new Parish Hall chairs and we were not sure what to do with our old ones. Two members of this congregation loaded them up and brought them to St. George's. God "spoke" to those parishioners and brought the chairs to where they were desperately needed. God is speaking. I'm not sure what God is up to, because we're not far enough away from it yet, but God is up to something – taking what we no longer needed and brought them to where they were repurposed to help those who depend upon the food pantry and recovery programs. That sounds biblical.

Lastly, we are getting ready for our 4th annual New to You Art Sale where we take your gently used art and sell it; all the proceeds go to Turning Points in Bradenton where they are helping those who are experiencing homelessness and keeping others from experiencing it. New this year: our Outreach Commission has been working with the Social Action Committee (outreach) at Temple Beth Israel. Members of the Social Action Committee will be at All Angels helping us sell art to our community. Yes, people of the Jewish faith, in an Episcopal church, selling used art from our community to our island community together with our Outreach commission; working together to help those experiencing homelessness in Bradenton. That's biblical! That's God speaking. Again, it's too soon to tell what God is saying in all this, but from leftovers, to blue chairs, to used art, God is speaking.

In our Gospel lesson, Philip had been called by Jesus to follow him. Philip then found Nathaniel and told him that the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, has called him to follow. Nathaniel replied, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip wisely replied, "Come and see." I ask you, can anything good come out of leftovers from the Spring Fling, the Christmas Tea and the Epiphany Party? Come and see. Can anything good come out of used art? Can anything good come out of All Saint's Tacoma... come and see.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.