

### **“Can You Hear Me Now?” – John 1:43-51 – Jan 15/12**

Have you noticed how the days are getting just a little bit longer? It's still measured in minutes, but we're far enough from the Winter Solstice (Dec 21) that we can begin to notice the increasing amount of daylight. It's still dark when I get up, but it's no longer dark at 5:00pm. The light is spreading, and that is a very good thing, even if it is bit-by-bit!

I apologize if that is too obvious a lead-in to our look at today's reading from John's gospel, but the connection between the light spreading bit-by-bit in our dark winter and the light spreading bit-by-bit in this particular text was too strong to pass up, especially in this season of Epiphany (named from the Greek word meaning “to shine forth”).

Before we can begin to understand this story we need to acknowledge that there are several curious statements and questions made in this encounter between Jesus and two men whom He called to be disciples. You may recall that just prior to this incident two other men, Andrew and Simon (who would be renamed Peter) who were disciples of John the Baptizer heard that strange prophet comment about Jesus being the “Lamb of God”. Intrigued, they turned to follow Jesus who turned and asked them, “what are you looking for?” We need also to note how powerfully we can read our own prejudices into that – or any – question. With the merest change in inflection the meaning we get from that question changes from a gentle enough enquiry – “yes, can I help you?” through a more confrontational, “what do you want?” and even to the harsh and dangerous street challenge of “you looking at me?”

In our reading today we hear that sequence repeated the next day. However, this time the challenging question is posed by yet another new disciple, Nathaniel, to his buddy Philip. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” is the question, and again we can all too easily force our own interpretation onto the question, depending on our experience or our attitude. Depending on inflection that question can be heard ranging from a gentle, self-effacing sense of wonder, “could it be possible something good can come out of Nazareth?”, signaling a hopefulness, to a snotty and arrogant derision, “can anything good come out of Nazareth?”, where the implication is “of course nothing can!” Can you see how the answer we understand from the question can be influenced by how we hear the question?

The last time I preached on this text I took the approach that Jesus dialogued with Nathaniel in a positive way, hearing his comment to Nathaniel about no guile as being rather a compliment. But there is a totally different way to hear the conversation here, and I think we can grow our own faith a bit by looking at it in that different way.

Let's start with Nathaniel's question to Philip and hear it in the negative way, a kind of condemnation not only of the region of Nazareth but spilling over into Philip's choice of a Messiah. Add a bit of nasal sneering to the question, “can anything good come out of Nazareth?” and you begin to get the sense of just how Nathaniel dismissed Philip with a haughty snort.

When we hear it that way, then Jesus' statement to, or rather about, Nathaniel comes across in a totally different light, doesn't it? With that negative tone ringing in our ears we also can hear Jesus' comment in a totally different way. Instead of the pleasing patronage of a kind of “here comes an honest fellow” now we might be able to hear Jesus confront Nathaniel with a very much in-your-face kind of challenge. Add a bit of a derisive put-down tone to Jesus' comment and his “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” becomes, “Wow, here is someone who can't help blurting out what they think!” Coming from a complete stranger that would rightfully be taken as a put-down, even a challenge against one's character, and naturally enough Nathaniel reacts by asking “who are you and how do you think you know me?!” The scene is set for a nasty confrontation, but with his answer Jesus reveals to Nathaniel that he saw him under the fig tree – and note that he includes the detail that it was before Philip called him. I wonder what it was that

Nathaniel was doing – or more likely thinking – there under the fig tree before Philip called him; whatever it was it must have been highly personal, and caused Nathaniel to recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

A strange way, perhaps, for God in Jesus to tap Nathaniel and ask him, “can you hear me now?” You do, of course, recognize that phrase as one of those popular advertising phrases ... it was by a cellphone company in the USA, although I can’t remember which one. And yet we see throughout scriptures attestations to God having called out to people over the centuries, asking, “can you hear me now?” Our reading from Samuel is one example of those encounters, another example in which the question was answered, “speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” Another example of the grace of God over the ages reaching out to people, and the glory of people like Samuel, Mary, Nathaniel, and all the saints responding with an affirmation that yes, they can hear and moreover they are listening.

In Samuel’s case the Lord went on to proclaim that the rest of his message would make both ears of anyone who heard tingle, and with hard message he had for Eli would indeed do so. The message for Mary was also profound: “you shall bear a child ...” and the result changed not only Mary but the world. That child’s message to Nathaniel that he would see the glory of God descending was also profound, and we can only assume that he was profoundly changed.

God’s grace continues to reach out today, and God still calls to each one of us asking, “can you hear me now?” Not very often is that call as clear as the voice calling to Samuel; neither can we expect a brightly-glowing angel to appear before us saying, “hello, I have a message for you!” More likely God’s call to us will come in a way similar to the way it came to Nathaniel, in the form of some unlikely stranger causing us to stop and think for a moment about our faith, and our relationship with God and others. Usually that call is and will be subtle, requiring us to constantly try to keep our ears open.

I know, I know, keeping our ears open is not easy; in fact it is so hard to do that we often fail to do so. How many times have you paused long after someone has said something that caused you to stop and think about your faith, your relationship with God and others, and consider that perhaps your response could have / should have been something quite different, a different reaction that would likely have been much more pleasing to God? If you’re like me then you will have had that experience many times, and can expect for it to happen again.

But again, God’s grace shines through, for even though our ears are often plugged, even though our mind is so focused on thoughts of ourselves that we can’t hear anything from the outside, even though we have tried to close ourselves off from all external inputs, God continues to call to us, asking, “can you hear me now?” His promises are sure, his covenants are secure, his love is never-ending, and he will not and does not stop calling to us.

“So, how am I to respond?” you might ask. Again, the answer is laid out in scripture for us by the example of those who have gone before us. “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”, Samuel responded, and became a prophet in his own time. “Do unto me as you have said”, Mary replied, and fulfilled her calling to give birth to our Lord Jesus. “Unh, who is this?” may be our most likely response. “Unh, ok, what now?” is possible, and that’s ok too. Almost any answer that indicates a willingness to listen is acceptable because that’s where the call, and faith, and life itself begins to get interesting. That’s where you start to hear what God has planned next for you.

Don’t worry if you hear it wrong, or forget part of the message, or don’t really understand what it means. God doesn’t call just once, and that’s your only chance. God continues to call, and call, and call, asking, “can you hear me now?” and by the grace of God you will hear the call, and answer, and respond positively, “speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” Keep listening, and you will even hear the call to come to Supper.