

How do we know God is speaking to us? How do we create spaces that help us be aware of God's voice and will in our lives and our community? This question about responding to or even recognising the voice of God is one that has been a challenge for humanity since the beginning of time. There are many reasons for this, many of which are explored in our readings today.

The calling of Samuel by God, is one of the best known call stories in the bible, and for good reason. It models a very human experience of needing to learn how to listen, and also the confusion many might feel in what they hear. The interchange between Samuel repeatedly running to Eli's side when God calls him, reflects the ease with which we may miss God's call, or attribute it to a human instead. In speaking of their call, most people do not describe a major disruption in their lives. Instead they speak of a quiet, slow awakening. Like Samuel, people often tell about a period of uncertainty regarding what they are being called to do or be. Samuel needed Eli to explain to him what these stirrings mean. It often takes others in our lives to help us in understanding the call God places before us¹.

The story of Samuel reminds us that God's voice, often comes to us when we least expect it and often to those we least expect. God is always the God of surprises. It is also a reminder that as a community of faith, the church, we need to be like Eli, encouraging everyone to hear the voice that calls them forth into all they are created to be. At the same time, we help each other to tell the truth, even when the truth is hard to hear.

I have had a number of conversations over recent weeks about what God is speaking into the situation we are currently in. What does God say to us in the face of all the uncertainty in our lives created, not just by the pandemic and Brexit, but by the changes in global climate, and growth of misinformation. How are we voices of truth, grace and compassion in these situations? What is God saying to us, calling us to be? Sometimes it feels that we are all a little lost and uncertain about what this might be.

This is why I find the Gospel story from John of Jesus call to Nathanael and Philip, so encouraging. Even when we didn't realise we are lost, God comes to find us².

In John's account of this story Jesus 'finds' Philip who says 'follow me'; and then Philip 'finds' Nathanael. There is no ambiguity in this story about the voice or the call – they do not question the invitation they are receiving, rather there is a question about who Jesus is. Nathanael speaks one of my favourite human sentences in the whole gospels - "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" Nathanael begins with scepticism. Nathanael is like the sceptics who do not believe Jesus can be the Messiah because he comes from Galilee. Nazareth was a little known Galilean village, and Nathanael,

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-1-samuel-31-10-11-20-2>

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2021/01/epiphany-2-b-lost-and-found/>

from a different Galilean village (Cana), despises Nazareth. For Nathanael, to suggest that the Messiah comes from this small town is ridiculous. I like Philip's reaction to Nathanael – he doesn't try to argue with him. Philip simply invites Nathanael to "come and see." And it is in the seeing that Nathanael does in time believe.

Like Nathanael, there are times in our life when we greet the voice of God with scepticism – when we cannot believe that God can act with power or that God would speak to us or be present in a particular place. Or we cannot believe that God could possibly be saying that! What we can take from this narrative is that God's call comes when we least expect it and often to those we least expect – and may surprise us in the message we are given.

When Nathanael sees Jesus he recognises his authority, even though his first reaction is one of disbelief. Many do the same thing. Sometimes this response is out of anger or fear; sometimes it is about uncertainty or even indifference. When we meet the authority of Jesus in our faith relationship we know things change – and sometimes we may not want to!

The most perplexing part of the story for me is in start of the conversation between Jesus and Nathanael - Jesus recognizes him, prompting Nathaniel to ask, "How do you know me?" Jesus answers, "I saw you under the fig tree" (verse 48). I am never sure what do to with this but I think it offers us a possible 'moral' which is worth consideration, especially at this time. Jesus saw Nathanael under the fig tree. He noticed him³.

But why? Why was Nathaniel under the tree? Seeking shelter from a sweltering sun? Looking for figs? Who knows? Whatever the reason Jesus sees him, notices him, decides he is a person to have a conversation with, a potential relationship. What do we see when we see a face? Are we open to the potential conversation, to potential relationship?

And at a time such as ours, when for the most part we do not see people's faces, rather only their eyes over the top of a mask – what do we see, what do we notice, what assumptions do we make?

These two stories of 'call' offer us many directions to explore – some easier than others.

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-john-143-51-5>

Firstly, I think that they remind us that no matter how lost or uncertain we feel in these strange times, God sees us, God is speaking to us, even if it is hard of us at times to hear or welcome this advance.

Secondly, we need the support of others, the wisdom of another's experience, to help us know what and who we are hearing; or to bring us to meet a new situation. We also need to be challenged to see those we might not notice.

Both the stories we hear today take place in moments in history when there is huge societal changes taking place – the whole story of Samuel is set against the backdrop of Eli's misuse of power and changing leadership in the temple. Philip and Nathanael are amongst the first to follow Jesus, at a time when insurrection and political change is growing in Judea. Neither of these stories take place in a safe meditative situation, where the voice of God is clear and unambiguous. I think this is important for us to remember.

Today we hear stories of new beginnings, new stirrings of faith which bring fundamental changes to the communities around them – but they all begin tentatively through the acts of hearing and seeing – of noticing and relationship.

In our own uncertainty, the same gifts are required – and they are gifts we need to encourage in each other so that we may say 'Here I am Lord, use me!' Amen.