

1 Samuel 3:1-10
John 11:43-51
January 14, 2024

Encounters

The idea of revelation, which gives the last book in the bible its name, is that God has spoken to human beings. The Gospel of John begins in this way;

“In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was with God . . . and the Word was God . . . was with God in the beginning.” Eventually, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth.”

The first idea that comes to mind when we hear the word, “Word,” has to do with communication. We use words, among other things, to communicate with each other. At some point, we may even use words to reveal to someone our inner most selves. We might *tell who we are*.

Revelation in the theological sense is divine self-communication. It is called, “Word,” but for God, like for us, it also means action. A person reveals their inner selves not only with words, but by what they do, with their whole life direction. God has spoken through Creation, and now also, God has spoken through the Son, who brings Redemption. The pinnacle of God’s self-revelation is Jesus, and Jesus sacrificing.

Listening for God’s voice is a bit different from listening to one another. With each other, there can be sight. We can see facial expression and body posture, and we can have enough familiar knowledge to know

when someone is up or down, confident or confused, hesitant or determined, tired or agitated, rested.

It is not so easy with God; physical sights and audible sounds are not common. The words we use to speak of God are human words; the words of the bible and of hymns and the words of our religious tradition. It can sometimes be hard to decipher.

The text from the Old Testament gives an illustration. Long before the Temple in Jerusalem had been built by Solomon, even before there was a monarchy in Israel, the people were governed on an as needed basis, by leaders they called “judges;” and by priests, some of whom seemed to have served on a full-time basis. Once such priest was Eli, who ran the shrine at a place called Shiloh.

There was a woman named Hannah who was unable to have children, like some of the other women in the bible. She prayed for a son and promised to dedicate him to the Lord. Later she conceived, and her son was born. His name was, “Samuel,” which means, “asked of God.” At the appropriate age, Samuel was brought to the shrine at Shiloh to be a helper to Eli the priest. As we have heard this morning, there was a moment in Samuel’s young life when the Lord spoke with *him*, called him by name.

The story is well-known. Samuel heard a voice and thought it was Eli, but Eli had not called him. Three times he heard the voice, until finally Eli realized that *the Lord* was speaking to the boy, and so told him,

“the next time you hear the voice, say, ‘speak Lord, for you servant is listening,’” which he did.

Our text for the day ends there. But the story continues to reveal that God told Samuel that Eli’s administration would be brought to its end, punished, because of the corrupt acts of Eli’s sons, which he failed to prevent. The next morning Eli asked Samuel what it was the the Lord wanted, and Samuel was apparently hesitant to reveal it, understandably, but Eli insisted,

“Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you.” So Samuel told him the truth.

In the New Testament reading, and on this the second Sunday after Epiphany, which actually means to appear acting and speaking, we find Jesus at the beginning of the career that began at his baptism. The first order of business is to surround himself with a group of students, “disciples,” is what we call them, and the Gospel of John begins gives the account of Andrew and Simon, who Jesus nicknames, “Peter,” which means, “Rock.”

The very next day Jesus runs into Philip and says, those enchanted words, “Follow me.” Philip finds Nathanael, and the story is told about him, how he is suspicious regarding whether anything good can come from Nazareth. Then there is this interesting conversation in which Jesus greets him with;

“*Here* is a true Israelite, in whom there is no guile (nothing false).” And Nathanael responds with, “how do you know me?” To which Jesus replies, “I saw you under a fig tree,” as if that explains it. At that, Nathanael exclaimed, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God, the King of Israel.”

Jesus is a little astonished, “You believe because I told you I saw you under a fig tree. You will see greater things than that! You will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man,” like they did in Jacob’s blessed dream at Bethel.

These are just two of the many encounters between Jesus, or in the bible between God and various people. I feel a little like the author of the Letter to the Hebrews when he says, “what more can I say? Time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and (of all people) Samuel, and the prophets,” and of course there are too many to name.

We have all been encountered by God. If you think it is not so . . . pay attention. And remember that the stories the bible tells, the story the bible tells, is that at the fullest extent of God’s communication to us, to human beings, is Jesus, *Jesus*, who did not achieve greatness in any of the usual ways, not as a conqueror like Alexander the Great, or a literary giant like Dickens or Twain, or an inventor, he was not an Einstein or an Edison, or a political leader like Lincoln or Churchill.

Rather, he met people along the way and when he found them hungry, fed them, and when sick, healed them, and when ignorant, taught them, when guilty, forgave them, and in the end sacrificed for them. Jesus, who brought salvation, which is the word the bible often uses, but it turned out to be much more than a salvation of some individuals from problems in their individual circumstances - but addressed the human race at the level of its greatest weakness and highest need;

That is, at the level of mortality, which even in the great technological age, has not been overcome in any way, either by reason, or the accumulation of knowledge, or by advancements in technology.

At the level of morality, which, in spite of all the experiences people have had, and achievements made, has not improved. Human beings have limited moral capability. People are simply not better today than they were in the past.

And at the level of fulfillment, the sense that one has reached the highest levels of meaning, and even today people are still restless and unsatisfied.

Encountered by God, we are brought face-to-face with all these limitations. And Jesus has opened the heavens to us, and the invisible grace of God can be seen, through a glass darkly for sure, but plain enough, plain enough to listen like Samuel, plain enough to believe, like Nathanael. Plain enough for service and discipleship, for the Lord has spoken.

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