

“Calling in the Night”  
January 21, 2024

I Samuel 3:1-10

John 1:43-51

The New Year arrives and with cancellations, delays, online classes, and well-used snow blowers, we are slowly working our way through each day. I am reminded of the words of the novelist, Chiam Potok: “All beginnings are difficult.”

They are.

So it is good this morning to turn to two stories of beginning in scripture. They are stories of the call of God. They are ancient stories of beginnings that still speak to us.

The two Books of Samuel begin with a people in moral chaos, economic upheaval, and political uncertainty. That also sound like a description of our times. The people need to undergo a “radical revolution of values.” In this unpromising situation, Samuel is given a message—and we move quickly from a beautiful story of the call of a young boy to a tale of the fierce judgment of God.

This story tells about the end of one order and the hopeful start of another. It affirms that God can bring new beginnings out of impossible situations, that God can, as the saying that goes back to the time of slavery in our nation puts it, God can “make a way out of no way.”

And I’ll come back to this in a few minutes.

We also heard the gospel story of Nathanael sitting under a fig tree.

This story begins with Jesus, who always seems to be one or two steps ahead of everybody else.

Like when he finds Philip.

Jesus has the first word—direct and to the point: “Follow me.”

The call to follow comes to us as we are—religious or not, church going or not, involved or apathetic.

Jesus doesn’t say, “Go to church.”

Jesus doesn’t say, “Learn to pray.”

Jesus doesn’t say, “Feed the hungry.”

Maybe, in time, we will.

The first word we hear is simply, “Come, draw near. Walk along for a while. Watch what I do.” If you look long enough, you just might be convinced.

The One who offers this invitation is so compelling that we join with countless other women and men and line up behind him. We follow along as best as we know how. Maybe we even discover new ways of walking along with him.

I guess that's a major reason why people decide to belong to congregations. We're willing to put up with all the quirks of everyone else—and everyone else is willing to put up with our own eccentricities—because we want to be with others who have heard the same call.

We want to be with others who have known the same passion.

We want to be with others who are walking together in the ways of Jesus Christ, known and to be made known to us.

In this way, when hearing grows dim, when love is slight, maybe we'll find support from others along the way. The Christian life is not a solitary, individual one. We are in this together.

To Philip, to you and me, Jesus has the first word: "Follow me."

Hearing that call, faith finds a voice.

Philip—found by Jesus—finds Nathanael under the fig tree.

"We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote," Philip blurts out. "Jesus—from Nazareth."

The word "find" implies not simply discovering but seeking. In order for Philip to tell Nathanael what he has found, he must *first find* him. And in order for Nathanael to hear what it is that Philip has to say, he must first be found. Seeking, finding, and speaking are linked together.

And we announce not a program but a person. "We have found Jesus of Nazareth."

But what should we expect when we speak like this? Agreement? Conversion?

If Nathanael's response is typical—and I think it is in many ways—we can expect skepticism at best.

Sitting under the fig tree Nathanael barely looks up. The words about Jesus that Philip speaks fall flat even as they leave his mouth.

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nathanael asks. Nazareth is not the site of great expectations. Nathanael knows that.

When we speak from what we believe people will be skeptical. Can anything good come from the church? Can anything good come from that old brick building down the street? Can anything good come from the followers of Jesus?

Martin Luther King, Jr. was quite familiar with the disappointing characteristics of the followers of Jesus. "In the terrible midnight of war," King wrote, "People have knocked on the door of the church to ask for the bread of peace, but the church has often disappointed them. What more

pathetically reveals the irrelevancy of the church in present-day world affairs than its witness regarding war? In a world gone mad with arms buildups, chauvinistic passions and imperialistic exploitation—[our world still today]—the church has either endorsed these activities or remained appallingly silent. . . . The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state and never its tool.”<sup>1</sup>

If congregations such as ours are to serve as the conscience of our nation, it will help if we return to that story of the call of Samuel that we heard this morning.

The author of I Samuel remembers a time when the word of the LORD was rare, a time when visions were not widespread. That is to say, a time very much like our own.

Work, we understand.

Busy, we understand.

Tension, we understand.

But the word of God seems so silent in our lives. Does faith mean anything at such a time?

Samuel is just a child, and he, too, is puzzled in his own time. In the darkness he hears a voice. It sounds loud and clear. It calls his name: “Samuel! Samuel! Three times he hears this call. And three times he stumbles through the darkness to old Eli and says: “Here I am!”

In this unpromising situation, Samuel is given a message.

His words are not words of comfort. Samuel will speak words of judgment. He will condemn the failure of leadership at a critical time in the life of the people.

This seems like a story of endings.

The message of this story, however, is that, in spite of our human tendency toward failure and corruption, “God will not acquiesce to evil.” If we are to accept God’s judgment in our own time, we will acknowledge our own complicity in what is wrong and trust still that God “will do what is good.”

And so, this is also a story about a time of a hopeful new beginning that comes as old, established ways of doing things collapse.

Responding to Nathanael’s skepticism, Philip replies with the phrase he heard from Jesus: “Come and see.”

The great nineteenth-century American preacher Philips Brooks spoke about these words: “Come and see.”

“They invite inquiry,” he said. “They proclaim a religion which is to have its own clear tests, which it invites everyone to use. It is an open faith.”<sup>2</sup>

“Come and see.” These are the words each of us hears in some way—an invitation to investigate and see for yourself. It is a challenging invitation: “Don't take my word for it. Check it out.”

Those words continue to speak to each person—believer or skeptic—in times of change and beginnings. Do you find yourself asking “Why am I a Christian? Why do I keep trying to follow this way of life?” Or do you wonder as you sit here this morning what any of this could possibly have to do with you?

Come and see. Take a deeper look into scripture, into your own life. Don't take my word for it, but explore for yourself the strange announcement that Jesus is the living Christ; in him we see the glory, that is, the reality, of God.

The voice of faith will be met with skepticism. And in our skepticism, we hear “Come and see.”

Like many others, maybe like you, Nathanael accepts the invitation. He gets up from his comfortable seat in the shade of the fig tree and goes to have a look at this Jesus. But once again the next words are not Nathanael's. They belong again to Jesus. The one who is always ahead of the game says: “I know you—who and what you are.”

Over and over in John's gospel when people encounter Jesus there is the shock that comes with being recognized. Jesus speaks to them. Jesus knows them. It is almost as if his knowledge of them calls them into being. Certainly it calls them deeper into life, so that—perhaps for the first time—they know what it means to truly be alive.

Like Nathanael who replies “You are the Son of God,” we recognize Jesus for who he is because we sense that he has recognized us. He has seen us under our fig trees, known our own skepticism about the whole enterprise and still says, “Follow me.” He still invites us to “Come and see.”

At this point Jesus stops speaking to Nathaniel. He turns and we discover that he is speaking to us! “In very truth I tell you *all* . . .” he begins. “You will see greater things than these.”

It reminds me of that wonderful response of Brendan, a sixth century Irish monk, to a chieftain who asked what would happen if he became a Christian. He said: “You will stumble on wonder upon wonder, and each wonder true.” Come and see.

Jesus—always a little ahead of us—calls to each “Follow me.” Follow in living and in dying.

Follow to new resurrected life. That's where he's leading.

All beginnings are difficult. The challenges are always great, but our joy and hope are great as well.

All beginnings are difficult.

So let us begin once more. Let us begin, as we do each new day. Let us celebrate. Let us pray.

Let us rededicate ourselves to the long struggle for a new world, a new righteousness, a new peace.

Let us bring our best to what we do.

This is our calling as citizens of this nation. This is our calling as those who seek to follow the God who makes a way out of no way.

This is our calling so that these days will not be the end of what we do, but the beginning.

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<sup>i</sup> Page: 3

Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Strength to Love*, in *A Testament of Hope*, pg. 500-501.