



How did you end up in church? Who influenced you, prayed for you, or invited you into this journey of faith?

We all have someone who played that role. Whether it was a member of our family, a choir director, a Sunday School teacher, a professor, a chaplain, or a friend. Someone is responsible for us being here. In the readings we heard this morning, it is the role of Philip who said to Nathaniel, “Come and see,” and the role of Eli who encouraged Samuel to hear the word of the Lord.

The pattern throughout the gospels is that people are gathered together; and then they are upheld, fed, healed, restored and blessed; and then sent out. It is always a threefold movement of gathering, being upheld, and then being sent out. We follow the same pattern in our liturgy: we are gathered together, we are upheld and blessed, and then we are sent.

But the premise of being gathered together is that someone first invited us. Philip invited Nathaniel, and then Nathaniel had an encounter which changed him.

Eli invited Samuel, and Samuel had an encounter which changed him.

The process of the invitation for the young Samuel is extended over a period of time. Throughout it Samuel

offered himself by saying, “Here I am.” They become the same words that Mary will say to the angel at the annunciation, “Here I am, let it be with me according to your word.”

In this extended invitation, Samuel is becoming attuned to listen for a new word. The text tells us that “Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.” But he soon learns to listen, and hear what is revealed.

For Nathaniel, it is a word that he is first very suspicious of: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” he asks; and “Where did you get to know me?”

Curiously, it is in the moment of questioning for Nathaniel, and the moment of exasperation for Samuel, that God becomes most present. God becomes manifest. They have an epiphany.

Samuel *hears* the word of the Lord for the first time, and Nathaniel *sees* God incarnate for the first time.

Themes of light and darkness, seeing and blindness, listening and hearing are important themes in the season of Epiphany. This is a season of revelation when things become manifest. It is when things become known that were previously unknown. It is when kings follow stars, when people hear voices from heaven, when the glory of God is revealed through water being turned to wine in Cana and

people being fed in the wilderness with loaves and fish. All of these events are experiences of people seeing and hearing about the glory of God for the first time. And when they see and hear for the first time, they have an epiphany and say, “Oh, now I get it; now I know; now I see.”

All of this is beautifully captured in the text about Philip inviting Nathaniel to “come and see.” The word play of “know” and “see” is interchangeable here. In the process of Nathaniel coming to see, Jesus “*saw* Nathaniel coming towards him and says, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.’”

Nathaniel asks, “How did you get to *know* me?” (or *see* me).

Jesus says, “I *saw* you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

At this, Nathaniel falls down and says, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (this is the moment of seeing clearly - of things becoming manifest or known).

And Jesus asks him, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these... You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” For the reader, this is the moment of manifestation.

When did we last hear of the angels of God ascending and descending on anything? It is the story of Jacob on the run from his brother Esau, falling asleep in the wilderness, and having a dream where there is a ladder between heaven and earth and the angels of God are ascending and descending on the ladder. Jacob wakes from the dream and says “Truly God was in this place.” It is a critical turning point in the entire Jacob narrative, wherein Jacob becomes the inheritor of the promise and the vehicle through which salvation will be delivered. All of this in spite of the fact that Jacob is known as the supplanter, the one who deceived his father to steal his older brother’s blessing.

Nathaniel is familiar with this story. And now it becomes *his* story; but unlike Jacob, Nathaniel is not a deceiver, and he, along with the others, will now see heaven on earth as the angels ascend and descend on the Son of Man at the event of the crucifixion. Jesus, the incarnate one, *becomes* the ladder that brings heaven on earth, and earth to heaven. This is the event that Jacob dreamed about, and now Nathaniel *sees and knows*.

And so, Nathaniel, like the shepherds, and like the women at the tomb, and like you and me, is compelled to go and tell others, “I have *seen* the Lord.” Because the process of the invitation helps us *see* and *know* the eternal light and love of God.