

*In the Name of God who makes us, keeps us, and loves us. Amen*

Lord, you have searched me out and known me, the Psalmist says, you know my sitting down and my rising up, you discern my thoughts from afar. Nathanael becomes one of Jesus' disciples by having just this same epiphany. Nathanael was just sitting there in the shade of a fig tree when his friend Philip came to him to tell that this new character from Nazareth was the answer to all the law and the prophets. Nate didn't believe Phil at first, saying: Yeah, right, can anything good come out of Nazareth? But when Jesus shows that he already knows him in his special way, this strikes a familiar chord in Nathanael's memory: The Son of God has known my sitting down under the fig tree, my rising up in curiosity, and even my thoughts from afar. Nathanael knows from the Psalms and the Hebrew scriptures that the only one who can know him so thoroughly and deeply is the one who makes us, loves us, and keeps us, represented here and now by God's Christ in flesh and blood. For, Nate remembers, God created his inmost parts, and knit him together in his mother's womb.

Perhaps Nathanael remembered the story of young Samuel that we heard this morning. Samuel, who would in his later years become one of the most influential of God's prophets, spiritual director and confidant to King David, hears a voice calling him in the night. He mistakes it for the voice of his mentor, old Eli, who is sleeping in another room. Three times he goes to Eli and says 'here I am'. After protesting for the third time that it wasn't he who was calling Samuel, Eli discerns that it is in fact God who is doing the calling. He persuades Samuel to answer the *Lord* next time, and so when the voice calls him again for the fourth time, Samuel says 'here I am' and begins a life of intimacy with God, a life of conversations with the Most High. Together Samuel and God discuss the politics of Israel and anoint the first two kings, Saul and David. God has traced Samuel's journeys and his resting-places, and is acquainted with all his ways. God has called Samuel by name, much as God's true and only Son has called Nathanael in a personal and particular way.

I will share a thought with you, a thought which has become an opinion of mine over the years, though I find it is not shared by everyone. And, since you are Episcopalians, you are always free to disagree with your priest. Did you know that? Well, maybe I shouldn't have reminded you. Anyway, it is my opinion that it is likely that we each apprehend God in different ways. That since each of us is uniquely created, with a different mix of gifts and abilities, our experiences of God might well be diverse. I know that during my studies at my inter-denominational seminary, I met many faithful people whose life in Christ was often noticeably different than mine. And as I tune pianos for clients in their homes, I occasionally encounter deeply religious people who become very surprised that my experience of God could be different than theirs. In the past, I found this disarming and a frequent source of doubt in my own faith, but in my later years I have come to take great joy in the probability that our various relationships with God's Christ are custom-tailored. In one way or another, I think, God calls us each by name, hoping that we, like young Samuel, will answer 'here I am.'

Have you noticed that when we have liturgies of Baptism, or confirmation, or even funerals, we generally only use the first names of those on whom the service is focused? That is actually specified in the rubrics of the prayer book. The reasoning is that our first names, our 'given' names, are those by which God knows us personally and intimately; they are our names in God's family. And while the concept of biological family is clearly cherished in this world which God has created, our primary family is spiritual. We are all *God's* children. In our weekly prayer lists it is most common to find only first names, a tradition which follows that same reasoning. So, we are all unique in God's Kingdom, and yet we are all part of the same family. And we are loved, and we are likewise called to love each other, for such is the will of our Parent God.

This Thursday evening at 6:30 the various Christian churches in the Oneida area will get together for a 'service of Christian Unity' hosted by the OACC at the United Methodist Church just down the street, and I hope that many of you will attend. Pastors, including me, from the various churches will be leading the service, and all of us will sing out our faith together, pray together, and witness to our common faith. Thursday at 6:30. Whatever differences one might find in the customs, the history, the emphases, the way scripture is interpreted in the various traditions, we are nonetheless all in the same ministry, the ministry begun by Jesus himself, of reconciling humankind with God, and that common denominator ought to unify us in mission as the very Body of Christ. Please join us this Thursday if you are able.

Going back to John's Gospel, notice what Philip says to Nathanael: Guess what, Nathanael, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus the son of Joseph from Nazareth." And Nate gives his sarcastic answer. But does Philip then try to persuade him? Does he try to make the case? No, he has given his testimony. Instead of wasting time trying to get Nathanael to see it his way, he simply makes the invitation "Come and see." Come and see for yourself. Come and see if you apprehend God in your own way through this stranger from Nazareth. You have your own way of perceiving, Nate, don't just take my word for it. Come and see. What a wonderful motto for the season of Epiphany! Come and recognize, realize, understand, receive a revelation, Come and let that lightbulb over your head get switched on. Jesus sees how special and particular you are, Nathaniel, hear him exclaim: "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"

What Philip is demonstrating here is the best kind of evangelism. Confident of the wonderful faith he has himself felt in his own personal discernment, he seeks out another and invites the other to try his *own* discernment. Come and see...for yourself. Philip is modeling a behavior which is so important to our own times. We talk about needing growth in the church, but the more faithful perspective notices the need *others* have for Christ, and how we as a parish might be helpful in meeting that need. So the invitation: Come and see. But we can't expect or demand that all will apprehend God in the same way. Expanding our Christian communities, including the Episcopal Church and its individual parishes, I think, will depend on our wish to share our own testimony of love and then permit and encourage those who risk coming through that door to listen for God to call their particular names and to discern the Christ in their own particular ways. Amen.