

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Gospel readings appointed for this week and next week are both about Jesus' calling of his disciples. What it means to be a follower of Jesus is a pretty timely topic in these days of intensely polarized politics, particularly because there is a religious component to the political violence that played out in the Capitol ten days ago. Some of those involved in that violence, and some who incited it, understand themselves to be followers of Jesus, who they believe has called them to fight a holy war to "take back" the country that God gave them. Some believe that that fight, that holy war, is a literal one, to be fought with guns and fists and pipe bombs and gallows. Others decry the physical violence, believing this to be a "spiritual" war. There is now some dissention among conservative Evangelicals that they will have to sort out amongst themselves. But this religious dimension to the current political turmoil raises the question, "what does it mean to follow Jesus?" and "is Jesus really leading me where I think he is?"

I want to have a look at both our Gospel reading from John and our first reading from 1st Samuel to get at this question, and I am going to look at them together, particularly at the call of Samuel and Nathaniel in these two readings. Both Samuel and Nathaniel need help to hear and receive their call. Both of them recognize and accept their call. And finally, both of them get more than they bargain for – both are drawn into an unexpectedly rich relationship with God. I think they both help us understand our own calling and relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

First, both Samuel and Nathaniel need help to recognize and receive their calling. In Samuel's case, he hears a voice calling him in the night and assumes it is his master Eli, the priest. But Eli had not called him, and tells him to go back to bed. This happens three times, and only on the third time does Eli realize what is going on, that it must be God who is calling him. He tells Samuel to answer the voice the next time it calls, and not to come to Eli.

And then there's Nathaniel. Nathaniel is a friend, I guess, of Philip. Jesus calls Philip directly to follow him, and then Philip tells Nathaniel that he has found the one who they have been waiting for, the prophet like Moses that God had promised to raise up. Nathaniel is skeptical when he hears that Jesus is from Nazareth. Apparently, Nazareth didn't have the best reputation. But Philip helps him get past this prejudice and invites him to come and see.

Second, both Samuel and Nathaniel recognize and accept their call. Samuel does as Eli tells him, and when the voice calls him again, he answers "speak, for your servant is listening." God then tells him of the plan to punish Eli's sons for abusing their position as priests and blaspheming God. God had told the same thing to Eli earlier, but I think that just as Samuel needed Eli's help to recognize and listen to the voice of God, so Eli also needed Samuel to confirm that the message he had heard from God was indeed God's message and not a figment of his imagination.

Nathaniel recognizes his call when he encounters Jesus. Philip laid the groundwork for this encounter, but it is only when Nathaniel meets Jesus, and Jesus talks about seeing him sitting under the fig tree even before Philip told Nathaniel about him, that Nathaniel recognizes and affirms what Philip had claimed about him. This *was* the one they had been looking for. "You *are* the Son of God," he says to Jesus, "the King of Israel!"

Third, both Samuel and Nathaniel get more than they bargain for – more than they expected. The young Samuel gets an early lesson in the sins of his people, and has to bear the truth of that knowledge to his people. He is recognized as a prophet by them, a trustworthy prophet of

God. Samuel will be God's instrument in anointing Saul the first king of Israel, and then he will be God's instrument in deposing Saul and anointing David to be king in his place.

After Nathaniel's grand proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus has an interesting reaction. Clearly Jesus knows things that other people don't about Nathaniel, and Nathaniel is impressed. But Jesus does not seem to want this extraordinary experience to be the basis of Nathaniel's faith in him. "You're impressed by that? You haven't seen anything yet!" Jesus has yet to perform the first of his signs in John's Gospel, which will be turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana. John calls the miracles of Jesus "signs," because he is more interested in what they signify about our relationship with God in Jesus, than he is in showing off Jesus' supernatural abilities. John telegraphs the meaning of all of Jesus signs right here when he tells Nathaniel that he will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. Alluding to the story of Jacob's ladder in Genesis, Jesus reveals that he is link between heaven and earth, and the means by which the world will be healed and reconciled to God.

What does all of this mean for us here at the beginning of 2021, waist-deep in a surging pandemic, caught up in a crisis of social and political unrest and disfunction? First, as I have already indicated, I think that Samuel and Nathaniel provide us with examples of how our relationship with God is established and grows. All of us need the help of others in the Body of Christ, to recognize and accept our own calling. The practice and understanding of infant baptism reinforce this truth. Most of us were baptized as infants and have no memory of our own baptism. What we have is the witness and testimony of others, usually our parents and godparents, but also in the written records of our congregations and our baptismal certificates. More than that, though, we rely on one another in the church to nurture our faith and to speak God's promises to us in order to prepare the ground for the work of God's Spirit in us. It is all of these outside actions on us, beginning with God's action in baptism, the church's action in nurturing, and the sending of the Holy Spirit, that create faith in us and draw us into genuine relationship with God and one another.

Ultimately, though, I think this is about truth-telling. Samuel is given a message from God that is devastating news for Eli and his sons. Eli has not reigned in his sons' abuses and now there is to be a reckoning. Remarkably, Eli seems to acknowledge this, and he urges Samuel to speak the hard truth. Nathaniel's case is a little different. Jesus identifies Nathaniel as a truth-teller, one in whom there is no deceit. But this doesn't have to mean that Nathaniel is already who Jesus has declared him to be, just as Simon Peter is not quite yet the "rock" that Jesus declares him to be. Peter, after all, will go on to deny Jesus, and Nathaniel here is still believing and repeating derogatory claims about Nazareth. But Jesus has other plans for them.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we desperately need truth telling and truth-believing in these difficult days possibly more than ever before, especially when that truth is difficult to bear. The devastating news for Eli and his family, after all, was also good news for those they had abused and taken advantage of. We need to be like Eli, to acknowledge the hard truths about our individual and collective sin, and to pray with Eli that God's will be done. There is a reckoning to be had for us, to be sure, and that reckoning is more than we can bear. But Jesus has other plans for us, too. He takes our unbearable reckoning upon himself on the cross, and in exchange give us his abundant life. Out of infinite love and mercy he declares us sinners to be saints, and by the power of the Holy Spirit is at work in us even now to make that declaration a reality.

May God grant us grace in the days to come to be truth-tellers and truth-believers, because thanks to Jesus we can handle even the hardest truth. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.