

1 Samuel 3:1-10(11-20)

Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

John 1:43-51

When I was a little girl...and sometimes now as an adult...I always found the pictures with the hidden figures in them fascinating. It was such a great challenge...like Where's Waldo...to see if I could locate the hidden figures in the larger picture. One thing was for sure. Once I found a hidden figure, I saw it every time! It wasn't hidden from me ever again!

Such is the nature of "epiphanies," I think. Once we see something in a particular way, we can't un-see it no matter how convenient it might be to let it be lost to us again. An epiphany is a realization...an 'a ha' moment when we see something and we 'get it.' What had been hidden from us is now visible and crystal clear and never to be hidden again.

We are in the season of Epiphany now. It is the second Sunday after the Epiphany. On the Feast of the Epiphany, we celebrate the arrival of the three Magi, wise men or kings from the East, who made their way from afar to the stable in Bethlehem that sheltered the infant Jesus. The shepherds had already visited having been told by a host of angels in the middle of the night that the Christ child...the Messiah...had been born and was resting in a manger at a nearby stable. The shepherds came and they worshipped, but they did not proclaim. The wise men from the East not only came, but they proclaimed Jesus to be the King of the Jews and they brought gifts to honor and worship him. They got it! They knew who Jesus was and they knew when they had found him.

So it's a little confusing to look at the scripture readings for the Sundays following the Epiphany if we are trying to follow Jesus' life in chronological order. We went from the Magi arriving at the manger in Bethlehem to worship the infant to John the Baptist baptizing Jesus in the River Jordan when Jesus was a 30 year old man in just a quick jump in a 24 hour period. But the descension of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove over Jesus when he came up out of the water and the words from the heavens identifying Jesus as God's Son was another Epiphany. It

was an 'aha' moment for all who were present and for us as well. This is not just a good Jewish man doing what good Jewish men do. This is the Son of God.

And now, just 8 days after the arrival of the Magi in Bethlehem and only days after the miraculous events of Jesus' baptism, we have a scripture passage about an incident that occurred when Jesus began choosing his disciples. If we're looking for linear chronology as we tend to do, we can get some spiritual whiplash. What's happening here?

Well, our gospel lesson this morning is, indeed, another Epiphany story. Jesus has called Philip to be one of his disciples. He's from the same town as Andrew and Peter and he has a buddy named Nathaniel. Now Nathaniel is not the gullible type. Nor is he one who looks at the world through rose-colored glasses. He has a prejudicial streak as his comment: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" confirms. He's not one to be easily drawn in. That's what makes this passage such a powerful Epiphany story. With barely a word transpiring between them, Nathaniel knows immediately and instinctively that the man standing in front of him, the man who saw him sitting under a fig tree, the man that Philip desperately wanted him to meet, is indeed the Messiah...the King of Israel...the Son of God. Nathaniel reacts as if he has been hit by a ton of bricks. And nothing in his proclamation would make anyone think that he had any reservations at all. Just seeing Jesus and hearing him speak and being in his presence was enough for him. It was a dramatic 'aha' moment for Nathaniel. He knew right away exactly who he had encountered. He knew who he was gazing at. And he was 'all in' right away. That's a pretty dramatic Epiphany.

But not all epiphanies happen so quickly or so dramatically. Just consider the Old Testament lesson that we heard this morning. It's the lovely story about the elderly Eli, a servant of God, and the young Samuel who is his apprentice and helper. During the night, Samuel hears a voice calling him and he immediately assumes that it is Eli. But when he arrives in Eli's room, Eli tells him that he didn't call and sends the young Samuel back to bed. This sequence happens again. And then it happens a third time. Eli finally figures out that it is the Lord calling to Samuel, so after the third appearance of Samuel in Eli's room, Eli tells him that the Lord is the one calling him. He instructs him to say back to the voice if he hears it again, "Speak, Lord, for your servant

is listening.” Neither Samuel nor Eli understood the first three encounters they had that they had encountered the Lord. Some epiphanies take a little time for us to catch on. For many of us, the epiphanies that we have...our sure knowledge of the presence of God...don’t happen the first or even the second or even the third time. Sometimes those ‘aha’ moments are a long time in coming, but they are no less powerful when they do arrive. And once we’ve ‘seen’ God in an experiential way, the experience never leaves us. God is no longer hidden to us no matter what else happens to us.

And it happens to ordinary people in contemporary times as well, not just to the ancient figures in our holy Scriptures. This weekend we celebrate the life and ministry of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who lives for 39 short years in the middle of the twentieth century. We celebrate him and his life because more than any other American in our lifetime, he challenged us to examine, to re-think the way we practice our Christian faith and what the promise of our Founding Fathers really means when they proclaimed that ours was to be a nation that would provide justice for all.

No one would doubt that Dr. King was a conscientious Christian, but we might not be aware of his own experience of epiphany...the presence of God. After a number of setbacks and disappointments in his efforts to champion the Civil Rights movement and after he had received numerous threats to his life and to the lives of his wife and children, he became discouraged and frightened. He was on the verge of giving up when he had a kitchen table epiphany that he recorded in his book, Stride Toward Freedom.

“I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.

The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.”

At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever." Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything."¹

The epiphany Dr. King had alone at that kitchen table changed him. All epiphanies transform us. Once we've experienced one, we are never the same again. The presence of God is no longer hidden from us. We recognize that presence and once we see it, we realize that it will never be hidden from us again.

Like the hidden figure in the otherwise innocuous picture before us, it will always be readily visible to us any time we look at the larger picture again. It can happen quickly as with Nathaniel and Dr. King or it can happen slowly as it did to Eli and Samuel. But when it happens, it is an 'aha' moment of magnificent proportions...a gift from God like no other.

And we will never ever again be the same.

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.

¹ Martin Luther King Jr, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, 1st edition (Harper & Brothers, 1958), 124–125.