

Texts: 1 Samuel 3.1-10
Psalm 139.1-6, 13-18
1 Corinthians 6.12-20
John 1.43-51

The Word of God is so very rich. You can read it over and over again and still find something new in it. These passages before us today are a treasure trove. It's hard to know where to dive in first. I have loved for so long Psalm 139. I created a little piece of art for Cassidy before she was born with words from this text; wanting her to know that she is part of that awe-inspiring creation that Gordon reflected on with us last week.

The season of Epiphany is the season of light. It begins with the story of the Magi, it includes the story of Jesus' baptism paired last week with the opening chapter of Genesis and the creation of light in the world. Today we read two call stories: the call of the prophet Samuel and the call of the disciples Phillip and Nathaniel. Each one of these stories we are invited to read in this season of Epiphany have to do with the way in which human beings discover and discern the presence and movement of God in the world. Coming to discover God has this profound impact on how we understand ourselves - who we are in the world. That's what I want for Cassidy and all children in the world; to grow up understanding that they are fearfully and wonderfully made by a God who calls them Beloved.

Those words spoken at Jesus' baptism are spoken at each of ours as well.¹ We are, as Martin Luther King, Jr. called us, the Beloved Community. And that identity translates into a vocation and calling for each and every one of us. This season gives us the opportunity to listen again to the ways that God is calling us. There is something fundamentally human about this quest for purpose and direction. I can think (off the top of my head) of at least a dozen call narratives in the Old and New Testaments.

¹ See Mark 1.11 "And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." (NRSV)

There is a very similar pattern to each of these stories including the befuddlement of the ones called by God. Samuel really doesn't know God so thinks that it is his master Eli calling him when the vision comes in the middle of the night. Nathaniel cannot imagine anything significant coming out Nazareth so questions Phillip's assertion that Jesus could be the Messiah of God. If they have trouble understanding who God is and what God wants, is it any wonder that we struggle around trying to figure out what God is asking of us?

Although there are some people, of course, who seem to have a very clear sense of what God is asking of them. I find myself a little suspicious when people share some new idea or decision prefaced with the words, "The Lord told me...." I don't know if it's because such declarations seem so rigid; if God told you then who am I to question you? Or maybe it's just because it sounds so pious. Maybe it's because people have done some pretty awful things under the delusions of divine revelation. How many cult suicides began with a leader who claimed to have a Word from God?

To safe guard against these risks, some Christians make the claim that God does not speak today as God once spoke before. We have the Bible and the Bible is the word of God. They locate the revelation of God in the past and also limit that revelation to the words we find on the pages of Scripture. From their point of view, no matter what the question is and no matter what the topic of that question an answer can be found by quoting scripture - no interpretation is needed - because it is all right here. The rigidity of this kind of fundamentalism can quickly shut down conversation. Their theology of Scripture can be reduced to a bumper sticker slogan (one I've actually seen): "God said it, I believe it, that settles it."

Have any of you seen the United Church of Christ advertising campaign entitled "God is still speaking?" It was started in 2004 to address people who have turned away from the church because of just this kind of rigidity; people who have been alienated and rejected because they do not fit into the molds of traditional church life (whatever that means). The tag line reads: "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." There was a great TV ad entitled the "ejector" where

people sitting in a sanctuary attract the cold, disapproving stare of the good church people. The camera zeros in on a single woman with a crying baby, someone with a walker, a gay couple, someone who appears to be Arab. After this scan of the congregation, an usher from the back pushes a button and these perceived outsiders are literally ejected from their seat. The narrator speaks over the scene: "God does not reject people and neither do we."

I appreciate where they are coming from with this campaign. If rightwing conservative churches live out of the conviction that God has not spoken since the closing of the canon (the Bible as we have it today) and this leads them to be rigid and exclusive, you can understand why people think the church is irrelevant and stuck in the past. The assertion that God is still speaking suggests that the church might be a place where questions are allowed and understanding is evolving and it might be ok for you to come without all the answers and without fearing judgment. They are trying to appeal to people who have lived enough life to know that things cannot be as simple as the fundamentalists insist but who have also come to discover that life is far too mysterious and magnificent to be limited to what we can see and touch and measure as the secular humanists propose. God is still speaking and maybe God has something to say to me.

So how do we discern what is the Word of God and how does that connect to the written Word of Scripture? I happen to believe that the reformed tradition has a beautiful answer to that question. We say that we can only come to understand who God is and who we are when we have both the Word and the Spirit. Karl Barth, a reformed theologian writing in the mid-20th century, has a very helpful way of thinking about this. He describes the written Word of God (or the Bible) as a witness to the Word of God (capital W) as the Gospel of John describes it – the Word present in the beginning now made flesh in Jesus the Christ.

The Bible is a witness. It's written by human beings who never cease to be human – with all of their limited knowledge and cultural baggage. But when the Holy Spirit takes up these words, they become the Word of God for those who hear them. After all, God is Spirit – God is infinite – God doesn't speak in any literal sense of that word. But since we are finite, the

only way we can know God is if God is revealed to us in some visible, tangible way. Scripture becomes that revelation when the Holy Spirit takes it up. Then these words written so long ago, illuminated now by the Holy Spirit, become the Word of God to us today. What I mean by that is God encounters us through these words here and now in real time. So in the call of Samuel or the call of the disciples, we hear God calling us.

In order for this dynamic process of revelation to occur, we have to at once be listening to what is happening in the text and what is happening in life. Maybe one day you hear the story in Scripture of Jesus speaking to the multitudes on the mountain calling them to feed the poor and at the same time hear this invitation to join a mission trip to visit *Echo* in Florida and learn how they are working to create sustainable solutions to the issue of hunger in the world. ²

Or maybe you hear this conversation in Corinthians today and realize the wisdom in the claim that all things may be permissible but not all things are beneficial. You hear in this passage an invitation – no it's more than an invitation – it's a call from God to take a look at how you treat your body. You realize that being committed to health and wholeness in your own body and being committed to fidelity in your relationships is a spiritual calling deserving of your time and attention.

Martin Luther King, Jr. heard in the prophecy of Amos the call to let justice roll down like waters. He heard the declaration in Galatians that there is no slave or free. Then he looked around the segregated south and he knew what God was calling him to do.

The only way we can hear the very Word of God as we listen to the words of Scripture is if we pray for the light of God to be revealed to us through them. I don't know if you're familiar at all with the More Light³ movement – but this is the group working for the full equality of gay and lesbian Christians in the Presbyterian Church today. They take their name from a hymn based on a speech given to Christians taking up a new venture into unchartered territory. The words of advice given to them was to be ready

² For more information about the ministry of *Echo* see the web site: www.echonet.org.

³ You can read about the origins of the More Light movement on the web site: www.mlp.org.

to receive anything God might want to reveal to them even if it took them in new directions and even if it came from a source that seemed unlikely. His word of caution to them was against the kind of spiritual arrogance that assumes you have a corner on understanding the Word of God. In thinking about the spiritual teachers of the past he said:

"For though they were precious shining lights in their Times, yet God had not revealed his whole will to them; and were they now living," saith he, "they would be as ready and willing to embrace further light as that they had received."

For he was very confident that the Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth from God's Holy Word.⁴

The hymn was written in 1850s and was based on a speech given in 1640s recalling the final words spoken to the pilgrims before leaving to found the Plymouth colony.

In this season of Epiphany may this be our prayer: that we seek more light and truth to break forth from God's Word.

SUNG PRAYER FOR BLESSING: *We Limit Not the Truth of God*

We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind.
By notions of our day and sect, crude, partial and confined.
No! Let a new and better way within our hearts be stirred.
The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from the Word.

⁴ The hymn was written by George Rawson in the 1850s based on John Robinson's final address to the Pilgrims upon their departure to the New World in 1620 as told by Governor Edward Winslow in *Hypocrisy Unmasked*, 1646. You can read about the origins of the More Light movement and this hymn on the web site: www.mlp.org.