Sermon on Epiphany 2 Year B 2018
(1 Sa 3:1-10; Ps 139:1-5, 12-17; Jn 1:43-51)

I’ve probably mentioned this in the past but Denise and I are good friends with a couple of professional counsellors. We’ve had some amazing conversations with them over the years. A few years ago we were sitting in a Restaurant, the Bordeaux was great and the conversation got so intense and interesting that none of us noticed that the restaurant was closing up around us.

If I recall rightly, we were talking about mindfulness and how it helps us deal with fears and anxieties and each of us was adding to the conversation from our strengths, our friends from the latest they were learning with their clients; Denise from her work in dream analysis and Spiritual direction and me, well, I was probably just ordering more wine.

My point in sharing this story is that when we get together I don’t get the feeling that we’re simply trading stories; we’re not trying to impress each other; we’re trying to discover something and we’re revelling in the process.

The texts before us in Epiphany season are in celebration of and a call to come to the knowledge of God not as a set of beliefs but through relationship that involves dialogue and discovery.

Samuel’s introduction to this kind of knowledge makes riveting story-telling; it’s strange and weird features may initially seem irrelevant to people like us, but if we listen carefully his story and the other scriptures expose something that still makes sense, that may resonate with us.

One of the ways this first story does that is with the author’s line, “visions were not widespread.” Though we may imagine the biblical world suffused with supernatural experiences it’s good to remind ourselves that the characters in these stories experienced the world in large part the way you and I do, via our senses and by means of thinking and speaking.

Through communication and, as this story points out, miscommunication.

What we know for sure, what we experience, are just *those* sorts of things. Theoretically and in retrospect we may agree with the claim of our psalm that God is everywhere but the truth of the matter is that if God’s presence is everywhere that’s almost the equivalent to saying God is nowhere and lands us right back on our experiences.

When something is everywhere it becomes the sea we swim in, the air we breathe. If something is experienced constantly then however extraordinary it is by definition that which is “ordinary.”

And so when revelation comes to Samuel it comes in the sound of a voice, a voice that sounds like Eli’s voice. The knowledge of God, however present, is mediated through our human relationships

If we get this one thing, it will change us and open us to each other in a new and exciting way; we come to know God through dialogue, not exclusively, of course, but it’s one of the main ways!

This is the main reason we offer educational opportunities beyond our common experience of the Eucharist.

Notice that Eli doesn’t get what’s going on. Chalk one up for knowledgeable clergy…not! There’s a kind of Abbot and Costello quality to the conversation: “who’s on first?” No, he’s on second!”

The Bible has, often a kind of understated and dry humour about it; but the upshot is that the community of faith, Israel and the Church in all its sinfulness and silliness, is a community that mediates God, God’s voice, God’s direction and help.

But it all feels pretty ordinary when you’re in the midst of it which is why so many come to church, participate for a while and then drop out.

Usually, however, only after we’ve lived in it for a time do we come to understand how much we’ve been helped!

I think this is why God wills it that St. Thomas/St. Matthew grow, change and do what it takes to be that mediating community.

*The point of intentional interim time is not to tick off boxes and get ready to ready to write a parish profile and call a priest; those are just some necessary and potentially helpful side tasks.*

The real work of our community life in God is to grow in our awareness of how God is working among us and in us; what kind of life God is inviting us to live into and experience together!

We notice in our reading how, funny as it strikes us, Samuel and Eli need to work at it; God gives God’s self to us in ways that do not bypass our personalities nor do they bypass the stick-too-it-of-ness needed to make the connections that build things.

*That’s why the intentional interim process, with a half-time priest will be a 2-3 year affair and that’s if we do the necessary work of community building, praying and visioning together all along the way!*

Now, in our gospel reading we see how all of this gets deepened. Here we note that revelation involves not only God working through our way of “doing things” but involving our decisions as well!

Notice that Jesus “decided to go to Galilee.” Nowhere does it say, and it often does, that the Spirit of God led him or told him to go to Galilee.

Just as the story stands, the revelation that comes to Philip and then to Nathanael is the result of a very human decision made by Jesus and then, equally, decisions that are made by Philip to “follow” when asked and Nathanael’s decision to “come and see.”

Even more amazingly we see that revelation in our lives enfolds both our decisions and our scepticism, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” Can anything good come from religion? From the Anglican Church? From my attempts to follow Christ?

When and where are you sceptical? Pay attention to those times; they may be how God is trying to get your attention, precisely there!

Often it’s in confusion that we’re ready to listen again; that we’re ready to look at God and each other with fresh eyes.

God’s light can break into our lives at those points of contention and decision! This is why we are called to allow God’s light to shine in all the corners of our hearts and minds; not because God is a voyeur who needs to pry but because this is how genuine freedom happens for us.

The season of Epiphany celebrates light shining into the darkness; it’s a light that opens up for us fresh choices that allows us to say “speak Lord for your servant is listening.”

If initially, our response is confusion like that of Eli or Samuel, or even one of scoffing like that of Nathanael, the light does not stop shining but asks us to “come and see.”

Which character are you in these stories? How will you respond? I invite in the silence to offer your prayers, to come to the Eucharist with an intention formed from your response.

I look forward to exploring and discovering with you this next year as we grow together in conversation and prayer. Amen.