

The Lord finds Us

As we continue in the season of Epiphany, both the Old Testament Reading and the Gospel Reading for today deal with a special kind of epiphany of God to His people. In both of these readings, God is calling specific people to serve Him.

The First Reading tells of Samuel. Samuel grew up in and around the tabernacle - the tent where God had decided to show His presence to His people. At the time in his life when most modern-day parents would be sending their children to pre-school, Samuel's mother had brought him to the tabernacle and apprenticed him to Eli, the High Priest. Samuel was to live his life dedicated to the service of the Lord.

Samuel was still a boy when the Lord came to him. We are also told that the Lord came and stood there (1 Sam. 3:10). This indicates that the Lord's epiphany to Samuel was in the form of an objective physical presence of some sort. The Lord appeared to Samuel as a real, physical presence who had real physical words of judgment for Samuel to proclaim to Eli and to Israel. This epiphany of God to Samuel was the call to be the last judge of Israel and the prophet who anointed both Saul and David as kings over Israel.

Today's Gospel tells of Jesus giving an epiphany of Himself to His first disciples. He is calling them to follow Him. Today's reading deals primarily with the call of Philip and Nathanael who was also known as Bartholomew. A general overview of today's reading shows Jesus calling Philip who, in turn, called Nathanael.

The Gospel narrative is very careful to tell us that it is Jesus who does the calling: "Follow me," He says to Philip. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John makes it very clear that Jesus found Philip. Here is an invitation from God Himself. There is no intermediary. The words go directly from God's mouth to Philip's ears. This is a direct call from God.

God's call to Nathanael is just as valid. This is still an invitation from God Himself, but this time God issued His call through His servant Philip. Today's Gospel clearly says, Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the One about whom Moses wrote in the Law and about whom the prophets also wrote — Jesus, Joseph's son from Nazareth," (John 1:45). This is an indirect call. God used a go-between to call Nathanael.

This indirect call is the way God calls His people today. I'll be honest with you. If I were God, I would not choose a sinner like me to tell others about His salvation. I would not rely on fallible human beings to confess their faith to others. Nevertheless, I am not God, and God has ordained that we proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus. He has determined to work through that proclamation to bring salvation to all humanity. He works through His word as it is read, preached, and shared by His people. He also works through His sacraments as the church administers them through His called and ordained servants. As Martin Luther says in the explanation to the Third Article: "The Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel." It has been a long time since God has shown Himself in

a physical form as He did to Samuel, Philip, and Nathanael, but the call God extends from one soul to another happens continuously.

One thing that is consistent about all calls from God whether they are direct or indirect is that the call is from God. It is God who calls us. We may search for God, but we cannot find Him. It is always God who finds us.

Look at Samuel for example. He was lying down in the temple with the Ark of the Covenant, (1 Sam. 3:3). Now you would think that anyone who did that would know when the Lord was talking to him. Nevertheless, when the Lord called, Samuel thought it was Eli, the priest. Samuel didn't find the Lord. The Lord found him.

Look at Philip. He lived in Bethsaida. Bethsaida is not that far from Nazareth. Philip had lived his entire life just a few kilometres away from the Messiah. His remarks to Nathanael tell us that he even knew Moses and the Prophets pointed forward to the Messiah. So, he was looking for the Messiah. The Messiah was just a few kilometres away over there in Nazareth. He did not find Jesus, but Jesus found him.

Ever since Adam and Eve ran away and tried to hide from God in Eden, mankind has run away whenever the true God approached. At best, we think the things of God are there to make our lives miserable and boring. But it is more likely that we think God is out to punish and torture us. We are terrified of Him and so we flee from His presence.

Why do we flee the gracious hand of our creator? We flee because deep down inside we know who we are. While we are with others who are like us, we draw comfort from the fact that we are more or less about as good as the people who are around us. We go into denial about our sin. We can delude ourselves into thinking we are not so bad after all. We get comfortable in our moral degeneration because the world around us is about as degenerate as we are.

On the other hand, when God comes into our lives, we see the filth in which we live. We see the lies, the gossip, and the hatred. The contrast between our sin and God's holiness is absolutely terrifying.

So, when we look for God, we look for the god who measures up to our expectations. We look for the god who makes us comfortable. We can search and search and search, but we will never find the true God because we are looking for the god of our own making instead of the Holy God who is neither made nor created.

That is the reason that our salvation depends on God coming to find us. It is He who searches for us as a shepherd searches for sheep. It is He who has come down to us in order that He would take us up to Him. He did not come to punish us for our guilt, but to take the punishment for our guilt onto Himself. He did not come to let us fester in our sin, but to defeat that sin by taking it to the cross for us. He did not come to proclaim our eternal punishment, but to proclaim our eternal salvation through His resurrection from the dead.

God came to Philip in the person of Jesus Christ and - through Philip - He came to Nathanael. Philip, Nathanael, and the other disciples would witness all that Christ taught and did as He earned forgiveness for the sins of the world. God inspired them to write down their experiences and we have their witness in God's Word, the Bible. Now God comes to us as we read, consider, discuss, and preach that Word. It is through that Holy Word that the Holy Spirit works to produce faith in us - the faith that receives forgiveness, life, and salvation from the God who calls us to be His own and live with Him for eternity.