

Weekly Reading – Monday, January 12, 2009

Now we turn to the lessons for Epiphany 2 of Year B, and for Sunday, January 18, 2009. With the baptism of Christ behind us, the focus turns now to the calling of the first disciples, this week from John, and next week from the Gospel of the year, Mark. The epistle lessons during this season after Epiphany come, as is true every year, from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

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

The call of the boy Samuel to be a prophet of God is surely one of the most evocative and powerful stories of call in Scripture. It may hold a special fascination for children as it suggests that age is not a barrier to being called of God. The story begins with the wonderfully suggestive words, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." However, this report of the spiritual aridity of the times seems only to foreshadow or prepare us that something big is about to happen. God is up to something. On the move. Talking again. Had God ever stopped talking, or had human beings simply stopped listening? Samuel is one who listens, though he is not sure what, or who, he is hearing. Another of the great things about this narrative is the richly ambivalent role of Eli. The old priest has failed and judgment is coming, and yet he is the mentor and guide for young Samuel who will bear the word of the Lord's judgment. It is Eli who helps Samuel to discern who it is that is speaking to him, calling him. The irony continues as the word that Samuel hears is a word of judgment on his mentor, Eli and his house. Now here is a provocative thought. Are those called to prophetic ministry at least sometimes called to announce and bring judgment on the very people that have nurtured them? Said Calvin, "Judgment begins with the house and people of God." True prophets challenge their own. This means that for Samuel to say, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening," is a very costly assent. Just as the first disciples will leave everything behind to follow Jesus, Samuel's assent to hearing God's word and call will mean the double edged sword of God's word will cleave Samuel's own life, into before and after. In the end the key player here, however, is neither Samuel nor Eli, however important and interesting they are. That role falls to the elusive, speaking, calling God. It is God who initiates the action who sets in motion a new thing. It is God who chooses a child or boy. It is God who breaks down and builds up (Jeremiah 1).

I Corinthians 6: 12 - 20

Paul seems, as the passage begins, to be quoting slogans of the liberated, spirit-filled (or so they think) Corinthians who are exalting in a gospel freedom that has degenerated into a mockery of God. "Everything is permissible for me," is one such slogan, to which Paul responds, "but not everything is beneficial." As with the question of eating food offered to idols in chapter 8, there is to be sure freedom in Christ. But freedom is not license, and freedom can be abused. Paul, good Jew that he is, understands that freedom is not only freedom "from" in this case a law that cripples the spirit, but it is also freedom "for." Freedom for life with God. Freedom for dedicating one's body to God. Freedom for love of others. The idea seems to be that if you get your body tied up with a prostitute in acts of fornication, God won't raise your body up with Christ at the last day. You are united with one

or the other, a prostitute or the Lord, but not both. Vs. 18 (NIV) reads, "Flee from sexual immorality." That's quite a challenge today. Sexual provocation, enticement, image is everywhere in modern North America. Sex is used to sell everything, even more sex. Some churches, typically more evangelical ones, are addressing such matters as internet porn and sexual addictions. Pastorally today one must do more than Paul does, which is to condemn fornication. People need help with all this stuff that has really been brought to new heights by the internet. But Paul does end with a pastoral note. "You were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your body." Christian faith is not a dis-embodied, other-worldly, gnostic sort of spirituality (which may be what Paul is finding among some of the Corinthians). This is a spirituality, again very Jewish, that does not separate body and spirit, but sees them as parts of one whole, the human person. All the more reason for the church not to ignore the sexual wilderness that many today are wandering in.

John 1: 43 - 51

I always find it a bit of a challenge to simply "drop in" or "dip into" John as John's world-view and point of view are so different in many ways from the synoptic gospels. Better I imagine to preach a series from John, so that a congregation and preacher can abide there for a time. But that is not the plan of the lectionary, at least not right now. Still, it is useful for the preacher to acknowledge to her or himself and to the congregation that we're in a somewhat different world when we enter John, a world where words have more than one level of meaning, where what begins in a seemingly straightforward way can take a 180 at any time.

Here Philip has been called by Jesus who announces his plan to leave for Galilee. Philip goes to get Nathanael, who when Philip tells him they have found "the one Moses wrote about," evokes the memorable skepticism of Nathanael, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" On one level the point is that we all have associations with places, some seem like promising places others not so. For Nathanael, Nazareth of Galilee is hardly promising. But the deeper point is that here we are dealing with God and dealing with revelation. God's way don't fit our human scripts and expectations, not normally and not in Jesus. It seems telling that Philip doesn't react to Nathanael's skepticism, but simply says the three words that, in John, most frequently stand as a call to follow Christ, "Come and see." It should be clear that these are words with double meaning. "Come and check it out," on one level. "Come and have the eyes of your heart opened," on another level. Then ensues a difficult to fathom dialogue between Nathanael and Jesus, which culminates in Nathanael making a rather astounding confession of faith, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel." You think, "where did that come from?" and go back over the encounter to connect the dots. But you can't. It's not a human thing. It's a God thing. It's not that Nathanael has figured it out. It is that this truth has been revealed to him. But it doesn't stop there. You might think it would. A full-orbed confession of faith. What a great conclusion. But no, more is to come. A confession of faith in John is not an ending, but a beginning. Nathanael is destined to see much more, even the opening of heaven. Note the parallel to Samuel, where the encounter with God in the temple call, is but a starting point. Could it be that the point is not an "experience of God," a mountain-top experience as they say, but life with God and following God in Christ?