

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 17, 2021; Year B
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

1 Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

When my children were little, my mother told me this story about my older brother, her first baby. One day when he was about four, my brother took my mother by the hand. “Mommy, Mommy, come and see. I know where there are blackberries!” Mom shook her head. “There aren’t any blackberries in our back yard, honey.” He ran over and grabbed Mom by the hand. “I know where they are,” he insisted. “Come and see.”

Mom allowed her little boy to lead her by the hand, toward the edge of their yard, and then behind the little garage—and there, tangled in a thicket, was a straggly blackberry bush—just the right height for the little boy to see, and pick, and taste.

Before he even learned to read, and living in a place where no one had much respect for the knowledge of little boys, my brother knew what he saw, and he knew what he tasted. And so he ran up to his mother and grabbed her by the hand—“Come and see!”

We don’t really know anything about the Nathanael that John introduces in today’s Gospel—we read of him one more time, also in John’s account, when he joins Jesus and some other disciples in a fishing trip after the resurrection. Nathanael isn’t even in the list of disciples that we get in the other Gospels. Scholars think maybe this Nathanael is the same man as the Bartholomew we hear about in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, although we don’t know much about Bartholomew, either. Really, all we know about Nathanael is that Jesus thought he was honest, *truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit*—an honest man who stuck around until the end and got to know the Risen Jesus.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Philip said to him, “Come and see.” Nathanael knew what he saw and what he heard, and he wasn’t afraid to tell the truth about it. Apparently, he had heard about Nazareth—a rude little town in an outer province. Nothing good came out of Nazareth—so why on earth would God think to bring the Messiah out of that place?

But, then, God has a bit of a history of using the least likely folks, from the least likely places to get things done. For instance take Samuel, from our first lesson this morning. Samuel was just a boy who was living in the temple because he had been promised to God before he was born.

His mother was Hannah—and Hannah had lived for many years with her husband without having any children. She was miserable about that, and afraid that her husband would love his other wife more than he loved her unless she produced a son. (You have heard me say before that the Bible has better stories even than what we can stream during a pandemic!) Finally, she went to the temple and begged God for a child—and promised that she would dedicate the child’s life to God if only she could get pregnant. And so Samuel was born, and in due time, when he was old enough to leave his mother’s side, she took him back to the same temple.

Now the priest in that Temple was Eli—and Eli was not known for his grace in raising children. As a matter of fact, his own sons disgraced him—they took the meat

offered to God and cooked it improperly and shared it with their friends. But they were his sons, and he did not disown them.

Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." And God called on a little boy to teach Eli how to do his priestly work.

The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. What happened to Samuel did not make any kind of sense. First he had to leave his mother and go live in the temple with the old, ineffectual priest. Samuel was learning how to minister to a God who rarely allowed himself to be seen or heard. It is no wonder that God had to call Samuel four times before Samuel finally understood that it was God calling him. Samuel was just a boy. What could he have that God would need or even want?

But still, Samuel knew what he heard. And he delivered the message that God gave him. And God continued to use Samuel—to connect with the people through Samuel's ministry. It was Samuel who found David—when he was just a ruddy-faced shepherd. Samuel found him and anointed him King of Israel—and God's house on earth was established.

And then, a thousand or so years later, a baby was born in Bethlehem—the city of David—and once again, God used entirely unlikely folks to get God's work done—a pregnant teenager, an over-burdened carpenter, and their infant Son.

And one day, when that infant is all grown up, he hears *Can anything good come out of Nazareth? . . . Come and see.* And really, Nathanael doesn't have to see much, does he? How does this Jesus know he is an honest man? Well, he saw him under the fig tree. Jesus saw him, and recognized him, and knew him. And Nathanael knows that he is in the presence of God. Jesus even teases him: *Do you believe because I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.* And the next time we read about Nathanael, he and the Risen Jesus are going on a fishing trip.

God calls Samuel—and good things happen for the people of God. Philip calls Nathanael, and good things happen for the people of God. But, what do these stories have to do with us today? There is so much wrong in the world today—pandemic and civic unrest and systemic racism—or, if that is too global for you, how about an unbalanced budget, and a new-found leak in the roof, and the utter fatigue of everyone I spoke to this week, myself included. Isn't it time for some good things to happen for the people of God?

The little boy ran up to his mother and took her by the hand, "Come and see!" Years afterward, my mother would tell that story about herself and my older brother and the first time he taught my mother something she didn't know already. As I look back on the scene, I realize that my mother was pretty young herself—in her twenties, a stay-at-home mom with one little boy—it would be some years before I came along. Years later when my mother would tell that story, she was still amazed. "That was when I realized that I had as much to learn from my child as he could learn from me."

"Come and see," said my brother—three little words with lots of power for a four-year-old with a curious, loving mother. It was so unlikely that he knew something that Mommy did not! Still what do any of these stories have to do with us today, in a time when the word of the Lord is rare and visions are not widespread?

Tomorrow, we celebrate the earthly birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And it is a federal holiday—although I confess during this pandemic, when the wisest thing to do is to stay home if you can, Monday holidays seem to run right in to work days. Dr.

King was another one, an unlikely person, a Black child growing up in a racist society, but when he spoke, he took us places that we couldn't even imagine. And we began to dream with him of a time when

*all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last. Free at last. Thank God almighty, we are free at last.*¹

Dr. King's birthday reminds me every year that the least likely people can help us all get closer to the dream that God has for us. And this year of the pandemics of both coronavirus and systemic racism—this year reminds me of how far we still have to go to be able to sing that we are free at last.

God has a history of using the least likely folks at the least likely times to get God's work done—to chastise a negligent priest—to teach a young mother to respect her children—to open the hearts of the unknowing privileged—to bring salvation to the world. If God can use fishermen and mothers and preachers, teenagers, and little boys, and even an infant in a manger, who are we to say that God cannot use us—each one of us?

Come and see! And for awhile, at least, we do not mean, come sit next to me in church! What does "come and see" mean during quarantine times? It might mean worshipping using YouTube or Zoom. It might mean sending a card when you would rather stop by to visit. It might mean wearing a mask or washing your hands for the tenth time today.

Remember that it is the little things, the little loving things, the least likely things, and places, and people, that God uses to do God's work. Come and see God's dream.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have A Dream," as quoted by <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>