

John 1:43–51

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Taught for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 10 January 2012

This second Sunday in Epiphany is a lot of fun. The texts for Epiphany transfer us from our eyes to our ears. They move us to our hearing, and from our knowing of God as independent agents to God's knowing of us, as he takes hold of us to free and bless.

So we start into Epiphany with John 1: "In the beginning was the Word." "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not." Epiphany is a season of light, a season of manifestation or revelation, of various epiphanies in which we learn various aspects of the character and work of Jesus. But the light is in the darkness. That is, it is a flash rather than a light that dispels the darkness. It's like a rotating beacon that shows up different aspects of whatever it shines on, but never stays long enough to show the whole thing. You catch a glimpse, you get a brief picture, and the light moves on. And so the revelations of Epiphany are not so much to the eye as to the ear.

That happens immediately on this second Sunday in Epiphany, where we are moved to our ears. In the gospel we get a wonderful story of Jesus' word getting loose, helter-skelter, going from one to the next, catching hold, and of a promise of seeing that is captured in the meantime in our hearing. Then we get one of my favorite texts in all of Scripture, the story of Samuel and Eli, another story of God's self-revelation. And then two very interesting texts: Psalm 139, which deals not so much with our knowing of God as with God's knowing of us in our inmost parts, God knowing virtually every aspect of us; and finally 1 Corinthians, with the claim that goes with this. As God knows us, he lays claim to us and takes possession of us, so that our bodies belong to him. It's a terrific set of texts, enough to go on.

Found and Followed

So we'll work our way through, beginning with the gospel for today, John 1:43–51. This is a familiar text from the Epiphany season; it seems always to fall on this Sunday. Most of us have preached on it before, and it's kind of cartoonish. It's kind of fun.

“Jesus decided to go to Galilee.” From the sound of it, he has been over on the eastern side and is heading north. At least I get that impression; maybe that’s wrong. “He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’” Now, we should be very careful with these words. Both have a deeper sense than we traditionally think. When he found Philip, he didn’t just happen across him like a lost quarter on the road. He found him. He went looking for him, and he got him. And when he found him, he took possession of him. He said, “Follow me.”

Ordinarily the temptation is to think of words as symbols, and so to reduce this to an appeal: he appealed to Philip, “Won’t you follow me?” But in fact this is no appeal whatsoever. It’s a summons. It’s a command. Philip has no alternative. Being told to follow, he must of necessity follow, and he does. Like a magnet picking up iron filings, Jesus speaks the sovereign word that draws his disciples to himself. So he calls Philip, he says, “Follow me,” and Philip follows, so readily and without reserve that there is no description of how it happened. “Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.”

Having been called and having followed, Philip next appears in a conversation with Nathanael. Watch what happens to the word “found” here. It’s a lot of fun. Jesus found Philip and said, “Follow me.” Now “Philip found Nathanael.” He went looking for his buddy. Perhaps they were closer than that; I don’t know. At any rate, having been found, the first thing Philip does is go looking for Nathanael, and when he finds him, he makes this splendid announcement.

This is just fabulous. The first thing the human heart does is screw up the verbs. Philip has had no alternative but to follow, but now he announces, “We have found him.” You can ask who found whom. No question, Jesus found Philip. But Philip has barely gotten on the horse and he’s already grabbing for the reins, figuring he’s in charge of the whole thing. “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

Now, what has happened here? The divine word, the divine call, the divine summons has been turned into a human word. No doubt he is right. Jesus is the one of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. There’s no question about that. But of course Nathanael has been hanging around with Philip long enough to be a little suspicious. And because the divine word has become a human word, the first thing it meets is resistance.

“Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’” He’s from Valley City, for Pete’s sake; what do you think he’s going to amount to? Or he’s from Hillsboro, or from wherever, some little jerkwater town that doesn’t amount to a hill of beans, some backwoods or some great city, some neighborhood or community we know. Can anything good come out of there? This is the eternal preoccupation of the human heart: to prove that the other place is either beyond question good or beyond question evil.

Nathanael asks this question, but by now Philip has got something of his head back. Having relied on his own convictions, he is at least smart enough now to know better. He says, “Come and see.” You could preach a whole sermon on any one of these words. “Come and see.” It’s a lot of fun.

Seen Under the Fig Tree

“Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him.” Now the verb changes again. Watch it. This is great. Talk about a bug drawn to a porch light. He is so drawn, and he doesn’t have a clue. He is coming toward Jesus to investigate whether anything good can come out of Nazareth, debating in his mind what the chances are, and Jesus sees him coming. Who do you think is going to win this round? Well, of course you know right away.

“Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, ‘Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!’” Whenever the NRSV can, it reduces gorgeous language to the functional. “Behold an Israelite in whom there is no guile”: that’s a little better. “Deceit” has the sound of something deliberate; “guile” is more of a quality, it seems to me. Anyway: an Israelite in whom there is no guile.

Now Nathanael knows he is in the hands of somebody who is playing with a deck bigger than any he has seen in his whole life, and so he is astonished. “Nathanael said to him, ‘How do you know me?’” I always like this. I always wonder whether Nathanael is acknowledging that he has no guile. If he is, he has proved himself wrong right away; there’s some guile in the answer. Or maybe it’s guileless.

Now we find out what is involved in this calling. The calling is not an appeal. Good Lord, God knows better than to rely on free will. Jesus would never have gotten any of the disciples if he had relied on that. So he doesn’t fool around with appeals. He says, “You come here.” And whereas everybody else would start looking for alternatives, the disciples come; they follow.

“Jesus answered him, ‘Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.’” Here’s the cartoon. This is so great. First of all, we’ve got that silly Philip: “We have found him.” And now we’ve got Nathanael: before Philip found you, I saw you sitting there under the fig tree. You know the human heart; this is enough to knock Nathanael flying. “Nathanael answered him, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’” Apparently there was something special about that fig tree, or Jesus’ knowledge of him under the fig tree was so rarefied and so powerful that he is impressed by it.

“Jesus answered him, ‘Because I said to you, “I saw you under the fig tree,” do you believe?’” Are you going to go down for this? He is teasing and playing with him. It’s just fun. “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe?”

You Will See

But now listen. This is Jesus. “You will see greater things than these.” This is the promise, of course. You will see greater things than these. “And he said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.’”

Here’s a show for the eyes. You are actually going to see the angels of God communicating all of God’s gifts between the Father and the Son. You’re going to get insight into the internal workings of the Holy Trinity. You’re going to be able to see it all. You will see.

We should take this as both now and not yet. Jesus will say to Philip, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” In some sense we have already seen this, because we have seen in the Word the angels of God communicating. We have seen the Father expressed in the Son, as we have heard these stories told. So there is a now, and the Gospel of John wants to stress the presence of that reality, the presence of the new under the sign of the old. Even now we have seen the heavens opened. We have seen the Father descending in the Son. We have seen the Son, and so we have seen right into the Father’s heart.

But there is also a “will” here, a not yet, and the not yet is what we await. This promise has been given in the biblical word. Sometimes we catch glimpses of it here and there, now and then, in congregational life, usually in the most difficult circumstances. Where we are brought to our edge, where we have little, where every human possibility has been stripped away, we sometimes catch a glimpse of what is to come. And yet at the same time we know

that there is that which we have not seen, which is yet to come, and we await it in hope. We will see. We will see.

We've had a week of death here. A neighbor died, and then two of my uncles died in the same week, one out in Montana and one dearly beloved uncle down in Wisconsin. We were just at the funeral yesterday. Our neighbor died last week. I was sitting here at my desk working, and I saw six deer go by in the little patch of woods. You know, deer are urban animals. We live right close to the junction of Highway 36 and 35W, so we could not be more urban. But right here in the midst of everything, six deer walked by, including an eight-point buck and a gorgeous big doe, with some smaller does following. And my neighbor two doors away, who also has a window on these woods, saw the deer as he was approaching death. He turned to his wife and said, "It's time for me to leave on my journey." And he died.

Well, you can say all sorts of things. You can say coincidence. Or you can say he caught a glimpse. Sometimes we catch glimpses. We catch glimpses at hospital beds, deep under the sign of the cross, and those glimpses give us a sense of what is to come. So this is a deep promise. You will see. You will see the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. You will see into the very heart of God. And that promise, having been kept, will be kept.

So our eyes have something yet to see. But in the meantime our instrument is the ear. As Luther said, the organ of the Christian is the ear, because it is by the ear that we hear the promise of the gospel, and by the ear that the Word comes home to us. So the text moves us from eye to ear. And even with this saying, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see," the Word assures us that in the end the eye will see more than a glimpse: the darkness will be dispelled, the heavens will open, and the new creation will come. So we get this glorious promise.

1 Samuel 3: The Word of the Lord Was Rare

But now back to the ear. We get 1 Samuel, and what a lot of fun. You remember this Bible story, of course. I'm sure you remember telling it. I used to entertain my sons with it, and now I entertain my lovely grandchildren by telling them about dear Samuel, who heard a voice in the dark. He went to Eli. Then Samuel came to him a second time, and then a third, and Eli recognized that there was another speaker involved, that this was not something that goes bump in the night. Eli said, "Go, lie down," and told him what to answer.

This is a little troubling for those of us who raised wild preacher's kids. I was one myself, and I raised three of them. Eli raised a couple of them, Hophni and Phinehas. They helped

themselves both to the women who came with their offerings and to the food involved, and they offended the good Lord by their behavior. So the purpose of God's speaking to Samuel is to send a message to Eli concerning Hophni and Phinehas: the game is up. God speaks.

Now, the passage begins with a very interesting observation: "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision." Here is the biblical play between word and eye. They are complementary in some sense, but also oppositional in some sense, and there is scarcity at both levels. The word of God is not to be taken for granted. As God's speech, it comes from the mouth of God on the lips of another. Here it is going to come on the lips of Samuel, a young boy dedicated by his mother, sleeping alone in the temple, sent to bring God's message to old Eli.

This is how God's word comes: on the lips of another. And so it comes hidden, in a less than transparent way. And yet it comes in such a way that we know it's there, even as we know it's not there. When my wife and I left yesterday morning to drive down to the funeral, we prayed in our devotions that we would hear God's word. Well, you can't take that for granted. I've been to lots of funerals where the Word has been notably absent. But there we came, my whole family, a great big family, cousins gathered from all over the country to bury our dear uncle, and the pastor stood up and just let it fly. The Word was right on the tip of her tongue. Both Carolyn and I wept for joy. God entered our prayer. He spoke his word.

So we know this: the word of God is rare. We can't take it for granted. And so we go to the Scripture anticipating that God will reveal his word, and praying in hope that God will speak it again. And when he speaks, of course, it may not always be exactly what we hoped to hear, as Eli found out. It can come against you.

Psalm 139: Known by God

Now with this we get two other wonderful texts for this Sunday, Psalm 139 and 1 Corinthians 6. Psalm 139 speaks of the depths of God's knowing. Of course, this is a much-beloved song. "Lord, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar."

We know God only insofar as God knows us, and we know God insofar as God reveals himself to us. We know God not as a projection or an idea, but as the living one who creates out of nothing and raises the dead. And so when we deal with God, we deal with one who knows us, even as we are being known by him. We know him even in being known.

So Psalm 139 turns these texts around in a wonderful way to identify who the real knower is. Our knowledge is like the knowledge of a child, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13: now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now we see a little, we know a little; we know what has been revealed to us in Christ Jesus. We do not know fully. But as we know in a limited way, we are being known. And the word for knowing here, *ginosko*, as it is used in the Greek of the Septuagint for Psalm 139, has its parallel in sexual knowing. This knowing is not simply the knowing of shaking hands and saying, “Where are you from? What do you do? What’s your name?” This is the deepest level of knowing. “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain to it.” As the psalmist says, this is a knowing far beyond our grasp, a knowing that takes us into the grip of the knower and holds us there. We know as we are known.

So the text turns the verbs for us and keeps the verb in its proper place. The natural human tendency, like Philip’s, is to say, “Well, we found him.” But in fact he found you, and he found me, and he found us, and he is finding those to whom you speak, even as you declare the Word, not as an appeal but as an immediate reality: a gift being bestowed, a relationship being established.

1 Corinthians 6: Your Body Is Not Your Own

And with this we come to one of the really critical texts in our recent discussions as churches, 1 Corinthians 6:12–20. Of course, this was one of the first texts to be deconstructed by the advocates of the change in our church’s policies, the ELCA’s policies. Many of us who participate in this group are already long gone from that church and members of others, having been forced out. It’s a very difficult situation. But when we come to this passage, we see unambiguously what the deconstructionists sought to remove and what the church council or the Churchwide Assembly sought to eliminate: “The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.”

This is the root claim, the defining claim of standing in relationship to God. We are not claimed merely in our attitudes or as a matter of policy. We are not claimed simply in our disposition or conviction, but in our bodies: our human selfhood in all its dimensions, our human relationships in all their concreteness. Every dimension of human life is claimed.

And this is why, of course, sexuality becomes part of the discussion, because this is the last claim of the self, the idolatrous claim: “I am my own. I can do what I please.” As my oldest son

said when he was a little boy, “My want to do what my can do.” That is the root. Self-assertion shows up sexually as well as in the First Commandment, in idolatry. It shows up in covetousness, the desire for what belongs to another. So Paul attacks this rebellion full scale. The one who knows you, who knows you in your inmost self, has brought you into such a relationship with himself that your body is no longer your own. Your body, in all its dimensions, is an instrument of Christ Jesus.

Yesterday I was with my dear auntie, my uncle’s wife, married almost sixty years, turning around at the funeral and realizing that she was going home alone. As I spoke words of comfort to her, I took her in my arms, of course, and I rubbed her cheek with my hand. We held one another, as we cousins had held one another after the service. This is faith incarnating itself in the body. And as it incarnates itself in the body, this touching, this hugging, this loving, this gentleness, this hand-holding, this quiet blessing becomes the body of Christ: the face of Christ, the hand of Christ. That young pastor spoke so beautifully yesterday. She was wonderful. She spoke of all of us as the face of God to our dear aunt as she turned to go home alone. The love of God is embodied in the hands and feet, the smiles and the grimaces, the tears and the joy of the ones who surround you. It couldn’t possibly be better than this.

And so the apostle Paul speaks of the grip God takes, and that grip is the glimpse, you see. That grip is precisely the point at which we begin to see with our ears, and then actually begin to see with our eyes what is unfolding before us out of the future: the quiet embrace, the quiet touch, the gift.

On the way home I was telling my dear wife and my mother-in-law, who rode down with us, a story about another aunt of mine. I was down in Madison preaching, and when I had finished all the services, I walked out to my car to drive home to the Cities. As I came out behind the church, a tall, elegant woman came out of the shadows toward me. She was older and obviously distressed. She repeated my family name, “Nestingen,” and then she said, “Did you have a relative named Evangeline?” I said, “I did. She was my aunt, but I never knew her. She died when she was eleven years old.” The woman burst into tears and threw her arms around me. This doesn’t happen every day; I was astonished. She said to me, “She was my closest friend, and I just want you to put your arms around me and hold me briefly, so that I can be touched by a member of her family.” It was chaste and pure; there was nothing evil about it. It was just gorgeous, because this is love. It embodies itself. It is not spiritless and vapid and

empty and bodiless. The love of God is embodied in this relationship and in the relationships of everyday life.

So to throw this passage away is to throw away the incarnation. This is just fabulous. These are great promises Christ has made to us, and he continues to embody himself in our affection. And so our bodies belong to him. They are not to be used as a cheap entertainment center to complete what has been watched on television. They are vehicles of Christ's presence and care in the most concrete, down-to-earth way, so that in this loving touch, in this embrace, in the gift of the other who stands so close and blesses so beautifully, we get a taste of what we will see. Then everything will be fulfilled; then the whole game will be completed. So you get a sense here of everything that is at stake.

These four lessons have a way of going together around the theme of eye and ear. But in the end the ear becomes the beginning of an embodiment of the gospel that takes place in the human community.

Questions and Answers

A comment that when the Word gets loose, it warms everything up.

Yes, good. When the Word gets loose, that's what it does: it warms everything up. Lots of fun. That's the wonderful thing about the church in Ethiopia. They still have this very earthy connection, this insistence on the Word and on the embodiment of the Word.

An observation that in America we have become afraid of touch.

That's good, John. In the States we've gotten kind of spooky, I think, so afraid of touch. The international students understand. I remember when I was teaching in Tanzania, the principal, whose name was Wilson Nwagila, and I just loved him, would call me in and come around from behind the desk to the front, take my hand, then take my arm, then take my shoulder. There was no question we were having a conversation.

I was so touched yesterday when one of my cousins' children kissed my uncle's body. You don't see that anymore. We're so afraid of touch, and of course a corpse is the most frightening thing possible. But love reaches right through.

An observation that Nathanael asks his question until he gets ahead of himself, and Jesus steps in to ask what he thinks he knows.

That's exactly it. This is the danger of knowing, of course: like Eve and like Adam, we assume that our knowing is detachable. But this knowing is fundamentally relational. You hear, and hear, and hear, and you know, and you know that you are known. That is what happens. We get ahead of ourselves. We say, "Well, I know that." But we don't know until we are known, and then, knowing, it is always this.

An observation: now he sees them; better still, they know him.

Dean, is that ever perfect. I love it. Now he sees them. He has known them and known them and known them, and now he knows them. That's really fun, and that's the delight of these texts. And better still, they know him. That's exactly it. It's just fabulous.

God bless you. I will see you next week before we leave, and then I'll see you on tape for four weeks. God's peace to each of you. See you soon.

SOURCE

CROSS Talk, a weekly Gospel text study for preachers led by Dr. James A. Nestingen, St. Paul Lutheran Seminary. Recorded 10 January 2012 (about 43 minutes).

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Xi6QMYV74k>

Edited from the recording for reading.