

The Second Sunday After the Epiphany - Year B

First Reading

1 Samuel 3:1-10(11-20) optional verses in italics

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

Then the LORD called Samuel, and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down.

And the LORD called again, "Samuel!" and Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant hears."

Then the LORD said to Samuel, "Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which the two ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. And I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever."

Samuel lay until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. And Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." And he said, "Here I am." And Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide

it from me. May God do so to you and more also if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.” So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. And he said, “It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him.”

And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD. (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 6:12–20

“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything. “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food”—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.” But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 1:43–51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? 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.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

We’re now into the season of Epiphany whose focus is the showing forth (*epiphaneo*) of the Savior. Last week the first episode of Jesus’ identity being “shown” to humankind circled around His baptism. This week we will have (as the Gospel text) the calls of Philip and Nathanael. For an Old Testament reading our choosers of the Lectionary give us another call, that of the prophet Samuel. I will try to draw out some elements of the narrative in 1 Samuel so that we can more clearly find parallels and some stark differences between the two passages when I write on the text from John.

The call of Samuel has been considered by scholars who study the various “forms” found in the Scriptures (like parable, prophecy of judgment, history, etc.) to fit very poorly or not at all into the form they call “the call of the prophet.” (i.e. the call of Isaiah, or of Moses) It’s just too different from any of the others. There are a few formal connections, but not enough to put this passage into that category. As a result it stands alone and the differences from the other calls in the Bible speak as loudly as the similarities.

The most striking difference is Samuel’s age. In no other instance in the Bible does God call someone to prophesy who is as young as Samuel. Other formal dissimilarities might include the absence (in the case of Samuel’s call) of a specific threat to Israel, an objection on the part of the one called, or a specific commission to go to the people. But as much as these differences set Samuel’s call apart from the calls of other prophetic figures, what they really serve to do is demonstrate how exceptional it was.

For the sake of keeping our focus on 2 Epiphany and this text’s setting alongside that of the call of Philip and Nathanael, I will focus on two aspects of this story. The first is that the focus of the early verses is largely on the one who is called, Samuel. It is his response to the calling of his name four different times that constitutes the bulk of the story. If we include the optional verses the emphasis becomes more balanced. While in this early stage the prophet is not sent to the people of Israel with a message of judgment, he is still sent with such a message, but only to Eli. It is this second portion that I think makes reading these verses worth including in your Sunday services. Their message contrasts sharply with the vision that Jesus declares Philip and Nathanael will be given to share.

Second Reading

Now that we're going to see several readings from 1 Corinthians in a row in the Lectionary, I've put together a short introduction to this letter. It isn't meant to be exhaustive, that would take many pages, but I hope it'll help going forward.

A Brief Introduction to Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

1 Corinthians wasn't Paul's first letter to Corinth. It is the first of which we have any copy. In the letter itself he makes reference to an earlier letter. (5:9) This letter probably dates from around 55 to 56 C.E.

The members of the Corinthian congregation to which he wrote would probably have been largely members of the artisan class who made things like the tents and awnings that Paul made to provide for himself. These people did not enjoy what we know today as a middle-class existence. They knew no real financial security and lived day-to-day. There are clues, however, that suggest some among the Corinthians held greater status. There is a reference to an Erastus in Romans 16 that is likely the same Erastus who paid for the paving of a communal square in Corinth in return for his being elevated to a public office. People who were in this way socially and financially secure constituted a very small fraction of the population, and so likely a small portion of the congregation.

The Corinthian congregation included many Gentile converts. While Paul makes no real mention of Jewish converts in his letter, the fact that he makes so many references and allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures suggests to me that there were enough Jewish believers or Gentile "God-fearers" (Gentile hangers-on to the synagogue) among them to take their knowledge of those texts for granted. No doubt Paul had taught them from the Hebrew Scriptures, but these allusions suggest to me a greater familiarity. While Corinth was largely Gentile, it is quite possible that some Diaspora Jews had settled there, especially after Claudius' expulsion of the Jews from Rome in 19.

The Corinthian congregation existed in a very powerful city that had only been refounded by Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. It dominated trade both along the north/south and east/west routes along the isthmus on which it was centrally located. This gave rise to some social mobility that wasn't as present in other cities of the empire, as there were no families with long social standing/history in Corinth. There was an elite class, and those of lesser standing had at least some reason to hope they might join it. Only members of that elite class would have studied rhetoric and philosophy, but even people from other classes would have been impressed by hearing oratorical competitions and others expounding on the philosophers. This is likely the reason that Paul so clearly contrasts himself with those who speak "words of wisdom." Paul relies on demonstrations of power and the Holy Spirit.

What appears to be the primary reason for Paul's letter is what one scholar has called their "enthusiasm." That is, they are so impressed with their own spiritual gifts that they have lost track of their oneness in Christ and their rootedness in their Jewish heritage. This has resulted in factionalism and a hands-off approach to variety of inconsiderate and immoral acts. It would be easy to read the letter as one that is primarily concerned with "rule breaking" but this would miss Paul's point entirely. Yes, Paul writes at length about things like sexual morality and food offered to idols and the way that they seek advantage among themselves. But I don't think his primary focus is the behaviors. It is the spiritual illness that lies beneath them all.

Imagine a doctor coming into the exam room to explain the results of all your tests. He may show you your blood lipid profile or your x-ray, but those indicators are not the disease. You may, (like me) simply process lipids badly or you may have an inherited form of cancer. Her purpose in pointing them out and saying that these things need fixing is not her goal. Getting you on board with a treatment plan is. The illness that Paul is diagnosing is this reality: What the Corinthians place their pride in is not the Holy Spirit he preached. His treatment plan would have been to seek a Spirit whose manifestation is love for and unity with one another.

As we work our way through 1 Corinthians in Year B, I'll try to refer back to the social setting and fundamental purposes of the letter in the Divergences.

Now, on to the text for this week.

As much as I'd like to try to fit our second reading into a context that included Epiphany, or at least something about the calling of prophets, I just can't do it. I can't even blame this incongruity on the presence of tracks one and two. The only reason I can think of for the presence of this passage on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany is that the creators of the lectionary wanted to be sure it was heard in church, and couldn't find a better place for it. I certainly hope that's not the reason, but I doubt I'll ever know.

What is certain about this passage is that scholars widely agree that it is one of, if not the most difficult passage in all of Paul's writings to interpret correctly. It is considered to be awkward, called "fragmentary" and "incomplete." The specific cause for these verses (1 Cor. 6:12-20) remains widely contested.

Some scholars think that this text refers back to the incident of the man who was having relations with his father's wife in chapter 5. They suggest that all those sections should be read as a unit. I've read enough other ideas to find that unconvincing.

The bulk of scholars seem to go with the idea that the sexual immorality to which Paul refers is to be understood as sex with prostitutes. Not temple/religious prostitutes, but the more ordinary sort. The article that I finally landed on (and for which I'll provide a link) convinced me that this isn't the case either. Paul doesn't speak of it as an offense against one's wife, but against God. The frequency of religious phrases and images in those few verses makes it seem much more likely that Paul is concerned about men who visit temple prostitutes, or at least plan to. There is sufficient precedent in the Hebrew Scriptures concerning the condemnation of temple prostitution as disloyalty to God to further support this.

But it appears that this idea also founders on this fact. Temple prostitution just wasn't prevalent in Corinth at the time that Paul was writing. It had been said in ancient times that Corinth had as many as 1000 temple prostitutes, but that was hundreds of years before Paul. Rome destroyed Corinth in 146 BCE and rebuilt it in 44 BCE. In the new Corinth temple prostitution did not return in any meaningful way.

What Brian Rosner says in the article I'll cite below points out though, is that this does not preclude the presence of prostitutes in the temple vicinity during festival celebrations. The presence of such is well attested both in secular and biblical literature of the time. This accounts for the connection Paul makes to the religious significance of going in to these prostitutes, while also using language that was generally used to refer to the more ordinary type.

Paul is dealing with men in the Corinthian congregation who believe that "All things are lawful for me." These men seem to be inclined to eat idol-sacrificed meat and take part in the sexual excesses of festival celebrations in the pagan temples around them. Paul has a fairly specific concern that he addresses in these verses. This isn't to say that Paul lacks concern for sexual morality in general. He goes on to deal with that in the chapter that follows. But in this passage, the text has a specific origin.

(Here is the [LINK](#) to Rosner's paper.)

Gospel Text

There is a superficial connection between our text from 1 Samuel and this reading from John. Both involve a "calling." Aside from that, there is also an interesting parallel that I think I see. In 1 Samuel there are two persons who contribute to the prophet's acceptance of the call, God who calls and the trusted teacher (Eli) who helps the child understand what is happening. In John, Jesus plays both these roles. He calls, which sets Him in God's place in the calling of a prophet. But He is also the trusted teacher whose words help Nathanael become a follower.

There are different elements of what makes up a “prophet’s call form” depending on which scholar you’re reading. The call of Philip and Nathanael does bear some of these marks. One of them is an “objection.” In the case of Gideon’s call, he asks God to dampen a fleece on dry ground in the morning, then the reverse. (He was really hard to convince!) Nathanael’s objection, his question about the validity of what he’s experiencing is simply, “How do you know me?” Jesus’ response to Nathanael also fits into the elements of a prophet’s call, simply called the “answer.” There is another element that is assumed. In many calls the prophet called needs to be convinced of his worthiness. Isaiah has his “unclean lips” cleansed. Moses declares that he cannot speak. In each case God makes provision for the unworthiness. I think that Jesus’ declaration that He finds in Nathanael “one in whom there is no guile” heads off this objection while giving this element a place in the story.

What strikes me most though is the way that the content of the proclamation given to Philip and Nathanael differs from the calls of the prophets. The prophets are usually given an oracle of judgment. Nathanael is told that he will see an open heaven and the angels of God ascending and descending “on the Son of Man.”

This is especially important to me because of the way that the word “prophetic” has been used in the church in my own experience. I cannot speak for every use of the word, but for the most part the voices called “prophetic” in the Episcopal church have been those who bring words of judgment. I don’t think this is the Gospel’s understanding of that word any more. Instead, here from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry His call to those who follow Him is to declare a new truth. The heavens are opened and Jesus is like the ladder of Jacob that joins heaven to earth. This glorious vision will certainly highlight the difference between itself and our lives as we usually find them, but this functions as invitation, not judgment.

Prophecy works differently in the Kingdom. It opens our eyes to God’s presence and what is possible through the same. It does not point to failings and name the “evil” that it sees. Prophecy will likely cause us to recognize the gap between our lives as we know them and God’s vision for them, but this isn’t condemnation, it is a recognition of that which God intends to heal and lift up.