



THE SECOND SUNDAY IN EPIPHANY

1 Samuel 3:1-10 ~ **Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18**
1 Corinthians 6:12-20 ~ **John 1:43-51**

Gail O'Day

*We have seen the Christ
child at Christmas,
and Epiphany gives
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of the light of Christ
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The season of Epiphany takes its name and themes from the Greek word that means “appearance.” In its verb form, the Greek word also conveys a sense of shining with light, and “light” and “appearing” are pivotal themes for the Epiphany season. These themes are expressed explicitly in the lessons assigned for Epiphany itself (January 6, Twelfth Night). The OT lesson (Isa 60:1-6,9) emphasizes the shining of the light of God in the world (“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. . . Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn”), and the epistle lesson (Eph 3:1-12) focuses on the appearing of Christ in the world. The gospel lesson of the magi (Matt 2:1-12) puts these themes in story form, as the magi follow the light to the place of Christ’s appearing. The season of Epiphany occupies an important place between Christmas and Lent. We have seen the Christ child at Christmas, and Epiphany gives the church a time to experience the shining of the light of Christ before it turns to the journey to the cross.

The OT and gospel lessons for the Second Sunday of Epiphany, Year B, are suggestive texts for the season of Epiphany, because they each tell stories which revolve around noticing and responding to the appearance of God in our midst.

1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20) is the story of the appearance of God to the young Samuel. The structure of the story is straightforward: an introduction (v. 1), and the story of Samuel’s call, which follows a three fold patterning common in storytelling. Three times God calls to Samuel in the night and the call is not recognized (vv. 2-9). After God calls Samuel a fourth time, Samuel recognizes the voice of God and responds (v. 10). This is a wonderful story for Epiphany, because the themes of God’s revelation and of how one knows and recognizes God shape the story.

The introduction makes the theme of God’s revelation explicit, “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” This introduction does not lead the reader to expect a revelation of God, but rather quite the opposite. Samuel is ministering to the Lord at a time when the word of God is rare and visions of God, epiphanies of God, are uncommon. **The introduction hints at the question of whether the word of the Lord and visions are rare because God is absent, or because people do not know how to listen and look for God’s presence among them.**

The story of Samuel’s call takes place in the holiest of places—in the temple of the Lord, next to the ark of God (v. 2). One of the most interesting details of the setting of this story is its suggestion that proximity to the formal symbols of God’s presence in the world does not automatically guarantee that one will recognize God’s presence. God calls to Samuel three times as he sleeps in the temple, and Samuel automatically assumes that it is Eli who calls him (vv. 4, 6). The reader of the story knows that the voice that summons Samuel is God’s, not Eli’s, so the reader knows more than Samuel does. The suspense that is created for the reader by Samuel’s misperception

thus is not, “Who is speaking to Samuel?,” but “Will Samuel recognize that it is God who calls him?” and “How and when will Samuel recognize the voice of God?”

The first two times that Samuel runs to Eli after he hears a voice calling his name, Eli sends Samuel back to bed. In between the second and third calls, the storyteller inserts a comment that reminds the reader what is really at stake here, “Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him” (v. 7). There is not simple misunderstanding here, but an important theological point: Samuel does not know the voice that calls to him. The storyteller tells the reader why Samuel does not recognize the voice of God, but the suspense continues and even deepens—how will Samuel be able to recognize a voice that he does not know?

The suspense is resolved in the conversation that follows Samuel’s third call (vv. 8-9). This time, when Samuel runs to Eli in response to the voice that Samuel has heard calling him in the night, Eli does not simply send Samuel back to bed. This time Eli, perhaps now finally awake, realizes that “the Lord was calling the boy,” and instructs Samuel about who speaks to him and how to respond to the voice if it calls again (v. 9). Samuel lies down again, the voice of God calls him again, and this time Samuel recognizes that it is the voice of God, not the voice of Eli. (“Speak, for your servant is listening.”)

In a way, Samuel’s recognition of the voice of God might seem a bit anticlimactic—he had no dramatic epiphanic moment, where scales drop off his ears and he is able to hear clearly. Yet the non-dramatic nature of Samuel’s recognition is precisely the point. Samuel did not come to recognize the voice of God speaking to him because of some heightened individualized spiritual experience, but because he listened to a teacher of his community and his traditions who pointed him in the right direction. Samuel recognized God because he listened to Eli. But equally importantly, Samuel recognized God because Eli took the time and care to teach him about God and about how to respond to God.

Did Samuel have a vision of God? Yes. But was Samuel able to recognize God in that vision without the guidance and teaching of his community? No.

This is an important lesson that runs counter to more charismatic understandings of how and where we can find God. Did Samuel have a vision of God? Yes. But was Samuel able to recognize God in that vision without the guidance and teaching of his community? No. According to this story, the coming of God into the world is not a private event, open only to those with heightened spiritual gifts, but is a communal event. God’s epiphany does not

belong only to some, but is lodged in the community where it belongs to all. Without Eli’s instruction, Samuel was simply having a sleepless night. With Eli’s instruction, Samuel recognized the voice of God and his own vocation as a servant of the Lord. He recognized the presence of God in the world.

The gospel lesson, John 1:43-51, is also a text of communal epiphany. It, too, is a call

story, as Jesus gathers around him his disciples at the start of his ministry. It is a story of mutual discovery, as Jesus finds new disciples (vv. 43, 47) and Jesus’ disciples find out who Jesus is and what Jesus has to offer.

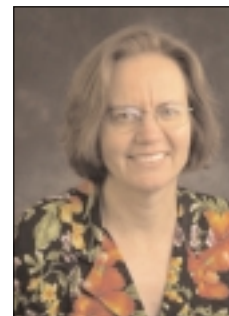
The lesson is an interconnected series of call stories: Jesus finds Philip (v. 43) who in turn finds Nathanael (v. 45). Philip greets Nathanael with a formula of discovery, couched in the language and expectations of his tradition, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Nazareth.” Nathanael greets this traditional designation with resistance (v. 46), and Philip greets this resistance with an invitation for Nathanael to come and see Jesus for himself.

Yet instead of Nathanael seeing Jesus, the story reports that Jesus sees Nathanael (v. 47), and recognizes the truth of Nathanael’s character (“an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”) Jesus’ instantaneous recognition of Nathanael is a turning point in the story, because it shifts the attention to Jesus’ superhuman knowledge and insight. One glimpse of Nathanael under a fig tree (vv. 48-49) enables Jesus to understand Nathanael so completely that Nathanael is moved from the resistance and skepticism of his response to Philip to

bold christological confession (“Son of God,” “King of Israel,” v. 49.) This encounter with Jesus is for Nathanael a moment of epiphany, when he recognizes the appearance of God in the world.

Yet as Jesus’ words in vv. 50-51 indicate, Jesus’ knowledge of Nathanael is only the beginning of his self-revelation, not the crowning point. Nathanael may believe in the appearance of God in Jesus because of the fig tree episode, but there is so much more in store. Jesus promises greater things (v. 50), and then describes the future epiphany for the disciples in language that recalls the story of Jacob’s ladder in Genesis 28. In Jacob’s dream, the angels of God come to him at a moment of extreme distress, and Jacob is assured of God’s abiding presence with him. Jesus’ words here build on that presence, as Jesus positions himself (“the Son of Man”) in the place that the ladder occupied in Jacob’s dream. Jesus promises his disciples that he will be the place where God’s activity on earth will be made visible, that the Son of Man will be the place where human and divine meet.

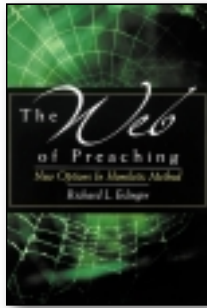
Just as the Samuel story invites us to rethink how we know and recognize the presence of God, so, too, does the Gospel lesson. The disciples who gather around Jesus identify him with traditional categories (“... him about whom Moses wrote,” “Son of God,” “King of the Jews”) and Jesus’ actions and words help them to see the ways in which his epiphany stretches their traditional assumptions. He is what they see in him, but he is also much more than they are immediately able to grasp. Their categories are a beginning point, and through his promise of vv. 50-51, **Jesus invites the disciples to keep looking for ever new revelations of God in the world.** The epiphany is not over in one single moment of recognition, because each moment of recognition creates the possibility of ever deeper engagement with the revelation of God in the world. □



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Preaching & Worship Resources

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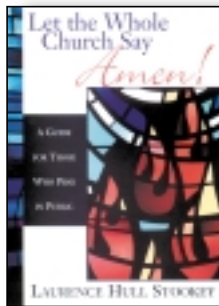
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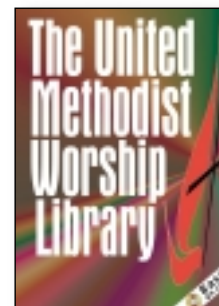
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