

Sermon – “I Saw You”
Sunday, January 17, 2021
Scripture Readings: 1 Samuel 3:1-10 and John 1:43-51
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Our first reading tells us the story of the Lord’s call to the prophet Samuel, who had been devoted to the service of God in the temple, but who had not yet encountered the Lord. Hear God’s words to us in these words from 1 Samuel 3:1-10.

^{3:1} Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. ² At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³ 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.

⁴ Then the LORD called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and he said, “Here I am!” ⁵ 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. ⁶ The LORD called again, “Samuel!” Samuel got up 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.” ⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸ The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹ Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. ¹⁰ Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

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Our second reading comes from the Gospel of John. Jesus here has been coming to where John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing for several days in a row, and people are beginning to follow him. Listen as two of his earliest disciples encounter him and see him for who he is, in these words from John 1:43-51.

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” ⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” ⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” ⁵⁰ Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹ And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

As I sat to write these words, just down the street, in the vicinity of the state Capitol, a clear and significant presence of police was evident. Traveling by, I saw patrol cars from at least five different police agencies parked in visible locations or roaming nearby blocks. Others, including actual military forces, were out of sight, but have been called into service here. They are not so out-of-sight in other places—whatever worries we may have here, capital cities of some other states are under a great deal more threat. We should pray for our brothers and sisters in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Georgia, Michigan, and other places where a whole lot more is angrily contested than here, and where the heat of human public interaction is already a whole lot greater.¹

The heat of human public interaction is...exhausting, is it not? Anger and division, falsehood and accusation; and sadly, physical violence. The church stands in a unique place in such things. We're given a mandate that ties us both to truth-telling and to human reconciliation, and those aren't easy things to do even by themselves, much less at the same time. How to exist rightly right now—what to say and what to shout, what to fear and what to doubt—is not easy to see.

Perhaps we can relate in some ways to the moment depicted in 1 Samuel. “The word of the Lord was rare in those days,” it says; “visions were not widespread.”² What our reading by itself does not tell us is that this also sits in the midst of a scene in which the priest, Eli, has allowed abuse of power by his two sons to go unchecked, corrupting the priesthood and religious practice of Israel.³ Then, as now, there was not much clear, direct vision of the will of God for the people to see and go on, and those who did claim to represent God might just be scoundrels.

What struck me when reading today's scriptures is how much of it is based on the notion of *seeing*. People are not seeing visions from the Lord. The priest Eli is unable to see well, not just literally blind but also blinding himself to the misdeeds of his sons. The Lord had seen this and promised, in passages shortly before and just after this one, to see this injustice overturned.⁴ Samuel is said not to have yet seen the word of the Lord, and he does not see who is calling him. Eli, the blind one, does see eventually that it is the Lord calling. Samuel finally looks in the right place. And when he does—this is what comes right afterward—the truth of God is seen through him, leading to Samuel being seen as a “trustworthy prophet.”⁵

The New Testament passage carries the theme no less. Brand new disciples are going with Jesus to see what he's up to. Nathaniel responds to Philip's invitation to “[c]ome and see”⁶ about this man Jesus. Jesus sees Nathaniel, and sees into him— “Here is truly an Israelite in

¹ This sermon was preached three days prior to the inauguration of the 46th President of the United States, a transition period fraught with conflict and concern, and rocked by an invasion, only a few days prior, of the United States Capitol by a mob angry at the electoral votes that were at that moment being counted by the Congress.

² 1 Samuel 3:1 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

³ This context is set in 1 Samuel 2:12-36, describing the offenses of the sons and how these things and God's severe disapproval were already known to Eli.

⁴ The dual prophesies about overturning Eli's priestly family come in 1 Samuel 2:27-36 (immediately prior to today's passage) and 1 Samuel 3:11-18 (immediately following today's passage, and in fact these words of prophecy were the first things Samuel heard from God when he finally learned it was God calling and responded appropriately).

⁵ See 1 Samuel 3:19.

⁶ From John 1:46 (*NRSV*).

whom there is no deceit!”⁷—and then reveals he could see Nathaniel under the fig tree. Nathaniel sees—astoundingly quickly—the identity of the man he has just met, declaring Jesus to be “Son of God” and “King of Israel;”⁸ and Jesus, answering Nathaniel’s astonishment, promises he will see much greater things than these.

All of us have seen something, somewhere along the way, that brought us here. It is tragic that in this, of all moments, we cannot actually be here with one another in person, because we all know that we, too, only see dimly, and that joining together in earnest listening and working together is how we often best see our own blind spots revealed and better discern how to live faithfully.

We also see, when together, perhaps the single thing most lacking in our wider cultural discourse in our present time: we see each other.

I am part of the generation whose coming of age included the explosion of a vastly greater ability for people to communicate while remote from one another. When I was in high school the Internet was an interesting, new phenomenon of which most people had only a vague notion. When I graduated college, it was an established framework of our human infrastructure upon which a significant proportion of commerce and communication rested. I have watched online communication evolve, from small dial-up bulletin board systems, through newsgroups and the widespread adoption of email, to massively centralized platforms like Facebook, through gathering places Slashdot and Reddit, and on out into the wilderness of TikTok, Twitter, Instagram and numerous other stages for remote interaction, as they have added onto and replaced one another at an increasingly rapid pace.

This sounds like a boon for human communication, and in some ways it is. Online community I happened into while in college helped sustain me, develop my thinking, and make me more open-minded. I will say it is true that a kind of actual community can exist among people who only know each other online. Sometimes the distance can even allow for honesty that people are not always willing to show in face-to-face interactions.

And yet, it is no surprise to me that this moment, full of yelling at each other at the top of their lungs, has arrived now, in the thick of this explosion in online communication capped by pandemic. If you’ve ever spent time in both small towns and large cities, you know the odd truth that it is possible to feel more alone and isolated in a city of millions than you do in a place of a few thousand. One would assume a city, so incredibly full of people, would provide no shortage of human relationship. The number of like-minded people with whom you could connect is simply so much greater. It is *possible* to find your place among them like maybe you never could elsewhere. Yet the forces arrayed against your ever getting to know those people are also greater. If you walk down a street and pass two people on your way, you stop and have a conversation. If you walk down the street and pass ten people, you wave hello. If you walk down the street and pass by two hundred people, you don’t even see them, nor they you.

⁷ John 1:47b (NRSV).

⁸ From John 1:49 (NRSV).

So here we are, in a crisis of seeing one another. Our great cultural move to the Internet for everything—news, conversation, friendship, political discourse, and entertainment—hasn't reached a settled, comfortable place; at this point in the shift nobody really has their bearing, and the things around us are constantly being torn down and rebuilt. We are flooded online not with a street full of two hundred people, but endless millions, and many people have no idea where to stop and rest. They are like hungry people in a car driving, nervously, through a neighborhood full of people of some other ethnicity and relievedly stopping at the first diner they see that appears to be populated by people “like them.” And then, here comes a pandemic, pushing us out of the real-life spaces where we are forced sometimes to encounter and see people different from us.

It is no wonder, then, that people today find themselves not on opposite sides of arguments, but in alternate universes. They look at the same images and do not even see the same thing, read the same words and do not see the same meaning, observe the same actions and do not see the same deeds.

And the foundation under it all is the one central tragedy: they do not see each other. Of course I should not really use the word “they” here, for the warning against walking down the street and failing or refusing to see one's neighbor is definitely right there in our own Bible and applicable to us. Let us not forget that story about the Good Samaritan.⁹ Seeing a stereotype or preconceived notion in our own minds, and not seeing the other *person*, image-bearer of God¹⁰—this is a cultural disaster of which we are a part, and a sin of which we must repent. We see race, we see cultural decoration, we see education, wealth level, and sophistication; we see region and accent, we see vocation, and out of all that we construct a mental formula in the shape of a person, and substitute that for seeing the real person across from us.

It isn't easy to overcome, and it is much harder when we cannot share a physical space and thus be reminded that one another are human beings. I recall in the days when I was not long out of college being active on a particular online forum. It was mostly respectful, but there were times when political or religious arguments there were heated. I remember there being one man in particular with whom I butted heads. I don't even recall the topics; only the sense of repeated, fruitless argumentation. But an unexpected thing happened one day. He mentioned, somewhere in one of his posts, that he was moving that weekend...and it turned out he lived in Milwaukee. Milwaukee was...not far from where I lived. It came to me to offer to help him move. He didn't even take me up on the offer, but I recall the tone of ongoing conversation changing quite suddenly after that. There was something different. We were not usernames from which unreasonable dialogue spewed forth; we were actual, real, live people, who resided only a few short miles from one another. And you talk differently to a person who is real to you.

⁹ The parable of the Good Samaritan, found in Luke 10:25-37, preaches a lesson based on the story of a man who was robbed and beaten, and whom passers-by, supposedly holy people, steadfastly refused to see.

¹⁰ “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” -Genesis 1:27 (*Revised Standard Version*).

I do not know every step of the road by which we all become real to one another in today's world; how we come to *see* one another. The issue is enhanced by some particulars of today but is no new problem. This very week we remember and honor a man and pastor by the name of Martin Luther King, Jr., who faced head-on his day's version of the continual crisis of human beings refusing to see one another. And those were nervous times, no less than today. My father has told me of remembering from his youth the fear that he saw fall across Chicago when King was planning to come there, and later, as an adult, gaining the perspective to understand better the true things that lay behind that fear for white Chicagoans. Martin Luther King knew quite well the violent results of not truly being seen, much more than we do, for in those days it was much easier for violence visited upon an entire race to remain hidden from the world—or at least hidden enough for purposes of personal deniability. King's great success was making sure it was seen, after all. And even in the dark places of the fight, here was a man who declared he had seen the Promised Land.¹¹

We are not going to end all strife in this land just by offering to help one another move...although, it might do more than we think. I know what the real world is like, and I won't declare here that the true Promised Land of brotherhood and sisterhood is just on the other side of getting together with people who stand unyieldingly against what we stand immovably for and singing a round of "Kum ba yah."

Or, maybe I will, for perhaps we've forgotten the song and the meaning of the words in it. "Kum ba yah" isn't actually a sappy declaration that everything is okay; it is a prayer. "Come by here, Lord," it says, over and over and over again. "Someone's crying, Lord, come by here," it pleads.

And that's a prayer we need. If our eyes are open and we've read our history, we know that real differences between good and evil, or between human stances built upon the conviction of what is good and evil, are not resolved just by approaching with pacifying, conciliatory words, holding hands and suddenly finding all people in harmony. Neither soothing words, smoothing over our differences, nor pages and pages of online rebuttals are going to bring us there. We need the Lord in there with us, to "come by here" and not just to open the other person's eyes to where we are right, but to open all our eyes to see each other, first, to stop us in our tracks with the recognition of one another, and then for us to speak once more from a different place.

If our eyes are open and we've read our Gospels, we know, of course, that it will not always happen that way. Jesus came in already, with the truest of true love, and we all straightaway killed him for daring to try to show us things like that. Refusal to see and malice toward what is seen are fully within the human capacity, and we will encounter those things. We will have to fight and stand in the way of those things. But let us pray that it not be so that we added those things to the world ourselves.

May God give us both the courage to stand and the eyes to see, a gracious spirit to love those we see, and the strength to live through these times in hope. Amen.

¹¹ King described his struggle and referenced Moses, who had been to the mountaintop and seen, but was never able himself to enter the land promised to the people he led (see Deuteronomy 34:1-4), in his speech popularly known as "I've Been to the Mountaintop," delivered the very night before he was assassinated in April of 1968.