

Sermon 2nd Sunday after Epiphany, Jan. 15, 2012

Responding to God's Call

Today's readings are about **being called, responding to call and taking a risk to be a prophet.** In Hebrew scriptures we hear the call of Samuel who did not identify the call when he first heard it. In the gospel we hear of the call of Philip and Nathaniel. Ordinary people who took a risk to give up their former lives and follow Jesus.

I think there are three common elements to any prophetic call. **First**, being open to being called. Throughout scripture we hear God continually calling people. But in order to hear a call a person needs to be in a posture of listening. The characters in today's readings made a decision to be open to a message. It was an intentional act.

The second characteristic of a prophet is **risking to respond.** It's good to be open to a new message. Everyone is invited, and many even hear a call, but not everyone takes the risk to follow.

The third element that I believe is part of a call is **not to control it.** This is the hardest part. What's essential is letting go of control. Not knowing how the call will turn out. Risking to NOT have all the answers, but remaining with unanswered questions.

Following a call is risky... it takes one into unknown territory. It's not safe or familiar. it is often unpopular and against what the world describes as common sense. And, this is when one gets scared and tries to control the outcome.

If its' true that God is continually sending these messages then it's not surprising that prophets come in all shapes and sizes and from the strangest places. Prophets come to us even today in guises that we would not recognize or expect.

I'm going to tell a story of when a prophet came to me from a very unexpected source. It was exactly 15 years ago today these same readings were read in my church in Washington, DC. It was the weekend of the second inauguration of Bill Clinton. My brother and sister-in-law joined me in Washington to attend the inauguration and the ball.

It just so happened that that Sunday was also the Sunday our associate rector of ten years was leaving the parish. Our church was in a search for a new rector. I was co-chairing the first part of the process. Our associate rector had indicated in a letter to the parish that she wanted the job. The Diocese of Washington requires an open search process for a new rector. So, if our associate wanted the job she had to leave during the search. The parish was divided ...half wanted to hire her and half wanted her to leave. It was painful for her to leave and I was one of the leaders blamed for her having to leave. So, it was a time of personal pain for me.

That Sunday she preached on the gospel we heard today. She quoted the part of the gospel where Jesus saw Nathaniel sitting under the fig tree. She said that the fig tree was as symbol of prosperity for the Jewish people. It was used in scripture as a symbol of wisdom, a place of safety and surety.

By calling Nathaniel out from under the fig tree Jesus was calling Nathaniel into the unknown. Nathaniel left the safety of the fig tree into a place unknown to him. The image of leaving the shade of the fig tree had great meaning to the original hearers of this story.

Our associate said that leaving our parish was God calling her out into the unknown. She said that our parish was her fig tree, it was her place of safety.

I listened to that message and found myself in my seat crying uncontrollably. I was unable to stop the tears. I think my brother and his wife thought I'd cracked up.

But what happened that moment was I realized that for years I'd been hiding under my own fig tree. I had been unwilling to do the things necessary when God calls. First, I wasn't open to listen for God's call. I was afraid to respond. I was in a good job that paid well. I had solid position and didn't want to respond to a call. And, I wanted to control the outcome of anything that had to do with my future.

The prophet came to me that Sunday from an unexpected source. Our associate, someone who was angry with me because I had frustrated her plans, that Sunday became a prophetic voice with a message I needed to hear. She carried a message about leaving a place of safety, trusting God and moving into the unknown. It was the Sunday I finally broke down. I finally heard a message and knew I needed to respond.

Well, 15 years later we are reading this passage, and I'm standing before you on our common journey into the unknown.

Prophets come from the strangest places. They are ordinary people. Who are the prophets in our midst? I submit they are sitting at your right and your left.

In the gospel Nathaniel says of Jesus “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” He knew the place...it was the next town up the road. How can someone great come from a backwater town like Nazareth?

God calls people from the oddest places. Samuel was just a boy, Philip and Nathaniel were from small towns in Galilee. This Monday we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. He came from the red clay hills of Georgia. Many of us come from small towns, and humble beginnings. Like Nathaniel who asked “can anything good come out of Nazareth?” we can ask ourselves, “can anything good come out of Preston?”

Just look to your right and your left. Think of ways prophets come into your life every day. We need to ask if we are leaving ourselves open to God’s call? Are we responding to that call? Are we giving up control about the outcome and willing to be used in expected ways to be a prophet?

Like Nathaniel who asked “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” we must ask what good can come out of you and me. Like Nathaniel we must risk to let go of that fig tree. We must consider what is holding me under that tree of safety? Do we have the courage to leave the fig trees of our own life and step out into the unknown and respond as Samuel did? Are we ready to hear our call and say “Here I Am Lord. Speak for thy servant is listening? Amen.