

SOMEWHERE AROUND HERE (2012.01.15)

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Psalm 139

John 1:43-51

Breaking News ... not hearing

That's a great image, isn't it? It could almost be a symbol for our current context! Because how hard it is at times to hear anything very real or meaningful amid the chaos of our modern world. How hard it is to see deep truth amid all the glitter and bustle of modern living. We are barraged daily, if not continually with stuff, with data and seductive technology that seeks our attention and our allegiance. Most of the time its hard to know what is significant and important, what is foundational, undeniable and real. **And God?** Who knows what God is anymore, or where God might be, or what God might doing!

It's a problem in our modern world and in our presently shifting paradigms. But it may not be just a modern; it may be a problem that's much more timeless and universal. Our Hebrew Scripture today comes from about 11 or 12 hundred years before Jesus and begins with these words "In those days (even then), the Word of the Lord was rare and visions not widespread." In those days, it seemed like God had taken a vacation and nobody really expected or worried too much about divine intrusion or presence. In such a context, the familiar story of the call of Samuel is positioned.

Do you know that story? [Kathleen just read it to us] It's a story of young Samuel, probably about 12 years old, given the ancient practice of parents presenting their sons at the age of accountability. It was night time, perhaps near dawn, for the text indicates that "the lamp of God had not quite gone out." The lamp burned all night beside the Ark of the Covenant where Samuel was lying. **Now here's the important thing!** It would be wrong to think of Samuel as a devoutly religious or uniquely spiritual child because Scripture says (verse 7) "*Samuel did not know the Lord and the word of God had not yet been revealed to him.*" He was just an ordinary kid who probably had no inkling that God knew anything about him or perhaps might call his name. It was a night like any other night and nobody in the story expected to hear the voice of God. Sadly, even the old priest Eli, who lived in the Temple (perhaps all his life) ... sadly it took him 3 tries before it began to dawn on him that the voice might belong to God.

Imagine! "In those days the word of the Lord was rare and visions not widespread."

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Sounds a bit like the attitude underlying the dialogue in the gospel passage this morning, doesn't it? John 1 ...

Philip says to Nathaniel ... "We've found the one about whom the prophets wrote. He's Jesus from Nazareth!
Then those debilitating words! "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"
To which Philip responds ... "Come and see!"

Nathaniel really had no meaningful sense that God might act or had acted. And clearly he thought that if God had moved it certainly wouldn't be through some carpenter's kid from the remote northern village of Nazareth.

Nathaniel probably got up each day and went through his normal routines, maybe even read his Bible, maybe said his prayers, maybe even went to worship, with little or no expectation that God might intrude or emerge in his life amid the realities of daily experience.

Author and Presbyterian preacher Tom Long tells the story of a young actor named Tom Key who played Jesus in the play "Cotton Patch Gospel." He writes:

It was a rollicking night at the theater.
Tom Key was clearly bringing the house down.

The play, a romping, bluegrass musical which depicts the ministry of Jesus as if it had occurred in the cotton fields and Baptist churches of rural south Georgia, was in its final performance run, and Key was feeling confident and even inventive with his lines.

His spontaneous enthusiasm was contagious, and he had forged between himself and the audience a rare bond of mutual exchange and appreciation.

During the scene depicting the Sermon on the Mount, Key, as Jesus, suddenly turned from the group on the stage toward the audience, pointed to the blank auditorium side wall, and said, "Look at the lilies in that field ..."

He stopped, almost as if he had forgotten the next line, peered around at the disciples, focused again on the audience and repeated, "Look at the lilies in that field ..."

Once more he stopped and seemed to be searching for the next words.
The audience began to shift uncomfortably.
His hand extended yet again to the blank wall, and this time he spoke the words slowly and deliberately, "Look ... look ... at ... the ... lilies ... in ... that ... field ..."

Now he turned to the disciples, shrugging his shoulders, and said, "I can't get them to look."

The room filled with laughter as it dawned on the audience that he really wanted them to look.
And sure enough, when he gave one more try, "Look at the lilies in that field ..."
every head in the audience turned toward the side wall.

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Is that the way it often is? Maybe? Even though we're invited to see, even though we know in our heads that God is around here somewhere, even though we know that God is close to our very breath, that God knows us utterly (as the psalmist reminds us today), even though we know and declare that God is the One in whom "we live, move and have our being," that God can and will intrude, we normally don't live that way, do we? **And that's curious, don't you think?** Why don't we live as though God could and will break through at any moment? Why don't we live as though God were embracing our life with every step? **It's curious, isn't it?** Is it because we've forgotten God? Is it because we don't pray hard or often enough? Is it because God we're looking in the wrong places? Is it because God doesn't participate in human life as much anymore? I suspect the reality is more that we live in a culture that has dismissed God. Or at least dismissed the outdated, archaic, patriarchal understandings of God that were once so prevalent. God is not particularly a key player in the game anymore. We've confined God to history or to heaven and said really don't need God too much anymore help us understand the mysteries of the universe. We put our trust in science, or modern medicine, or psychology or astrology. We've bought lots of life insurance and RRSP's. The God of our childhood is just not all that necessary anymore. **But God still is!** The God of the Bible is! The God of Jesus couldn't be anymore critical in these challenging times. So where does that God fit in? How will we come to know a God that is relevant and real? How will that God be conveyed? How will the world hear that God speak? Where will they look?

I would hope the most obvious place to begin is the church. The church should be a place where people can hear stories of God's life among the creation, stories of where God has touched human life, stories of where God is transforming this world. The church should be the place where miracles can be witnessed?

Martin Luther King Jr. in the New Testament today wonders if "organized religion is too inextricably bound to the status quo to ever be such a place... a place that can "save a nation or the world?" King gives thanks for "noble souls who have broken away from the rank of organized religion and the paralyzing chains of conformity to join the struggle for freedom." **Sometimes that's necessary perhaps!** But does that mean there is no place for the church today? That the church has nothing to say about God? I think that it means that at all! But I do think that it might be to say that the church must get beyond simply caring for itself as an organization, caring about religious stuff,

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about membership or buildings. If we're going to be meaningful, if we're going to speak about God's presence in the world today, we've got to be connected, passionate, courageous and relevant. '

Do you remember the Mercedes TV commercial a few years ago that showed a Mercedes crashing into a concrete wall during a safety test?

An engineer in a white lab coat walks over after the crash and kneels down to examine the damage, which is minimal.

A reporter then asks the engineer about Mercedes' energy absorbing car body.

After the engineer tells all about the unique design the reporter asks him why Mercedes doesn't enforce their patent on the design, a design evidently copied by several other companies because of its success.

The engineer then replies matter-of-factly, "Because some things in life are too important not to share."

And how true that is!

Paul Tournier was a famous Swiss physician, a dedicated Christian and the author of many insightful books.

After he had written his first book, he returned to his former medical school to visit his favorite professor.

Granted an afternoon of the venerable man's time, Tournier read his new book to his teacher.

As he completed his reading, he looked up to find tears in the old man's eyes.

"Oh, Paul," said the professor, "That's a wonderful book. Everyone of us Christians should read it."

Tournier was surprised. "I didn't know you were a Christian, professor. When did you become one?"

His old teacher's answer surprised him.

He said, "Just now, as you read your book."

In a world where "the word of the Lord is often rare and visions not widespread" there is a need for some folks to keep alive the reality of God, to open doors and windows on real truth in order that others may feel God's genuine touch on their life or hear God call their name in the dark nights of their living, folks who will keep God in people's awareness as they struggle to make sense of the realities of our modern context. Folks like you and me because that's the work that has been entrusted to us. And It could make a real difference!

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.