

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Year B
RCL



1 Samuel 3:1-10
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18
John 1:43-51

The Collect

Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world: Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

1 Samuel 3:1-10

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.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 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! 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. 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.” Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. 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. 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.

Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

Domine, probasti

- 1 O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from far away.
3 You search out my path and my lying down,
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
4 Even before a word is on my tongue,
 O LORD, you know it completely.
5 You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is so high that I cannot attain it.
13 For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works;
 that I know very well.
15 My frame was not hidden from you,
 when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
 In your book were written
 all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed.
17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
 How vast is the sum of them!
18 I try to count them — they are more than the sand;
 I come to the end — I am still with you.

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 about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." 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."

SERMON

Once upon a time, a long time ago, there was a brick. His name was “Bob”. Bob, the brick. He was a fine specimen of a brick, strong, red, without voids, as nearly perfect as a brick could be, and he was exceedingly proud of his strength, because he had not always been Bob the brick.

Once, Bob was merely a basket of dry clay. He had no shape, and no form. He was not strong, and could be blown about by the slightest wind. By and large, Bob did not dwell on his status as a basket of clay. He was reasonably sure that was the right thing to be, but one day, his life took a nasty turn. Through no fault of his own, he found himself suddenly lifted up, raised higher than he had ever been before. It was terrifying. There was absolutely nothing he could do to free himself, and he watched in terror as he was thrown into water! He

would drown!

The threat of drowning was worse than being raised up! Bob knew that if he were to survive, he must fight with the water. If the water won, he would be no more than slurry in a drain, and he summoned strength he did not know he had. He wound himself around the water, and bound it to him. Then, while he was still celebrating, he was lifted up again, and molded. Through exhausted eyes, Bob saw before him a horrifying furnace. Hotter than the sun, and he was being pushed into it.

Bob steeled himself. He held to the water that had tried to drown him as long as he could. He diverted his attention from the flames that surrounded him and thought thoughts of strength that exceeded anything he had known as a basket of clay. Bob persevered. He set his will. The fire would not conquer him, and that which does not defeat us makes us stronger.

When, at last, Bob emerged from the fire, he was no longer clay. He was no longer water. He was Bob the brick, and no wind, no matter how strong, would ever move him again.

As Bob sat with the other bricks, he thought about his adventures. He thought about the terrible way that life had treated him, and he blessed himself for the strength he had summoned to overcome the adversities that had been inflicted on him. Bob was proud of what he had accomplished and, as he thought about it, he became certain that he was destined for great things. Such suffering, such perseverance could only mean that his was a destiny of greatness. He could not wait to see what he would be called to confront.

We have two stories of call today. From First Samuel, we have the call of Samuel. From the Gospel of John, the call of the first disciples. Both are stories of

the selection of individuals for special roles in God's plan.

I think that's the way it always has to be in stories. Stories have to be about someone. We couldn't have a story about everybody. Yet, that's the story God reads – God reads about everybody. God is very democratic. Us? Not so much. We read about Samuel or Phillip or Andrew but the rest of the people who are intimately involved in what is going on, we refer to as “the crowd” or “all the people” as if they didn't matter. The crowd matters. God doesn't call individuals to special roles just to brighten up their resumes. God calls individuals to special roles so that “all the people” can see, with their very own eyeballs, that God is God. It is for the benefit of “all the people” that individuals are called to special roles.

Because we lack God's scope of attention, we don't

hear the stories of individuals in the crowd, but those are the ones for whose benefit the Samuels and the Andrews and the Peters of the world are called. The crowd is like a bull whip. Someone is called to move the handle of the bull whip in just a certain way. The first person in the crowd moves a little. The next person moves a bit more until, at the end, way beyond anything anyone in the crowd could anticipate, there is a terrific CRACK! and something spectacular happens without anyone in the crowd being able to perceive the importance of their contribution.

Let's look at Samuel's story.

There was a certain man of Ramathaim, ... He had two wives; the name of one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.

Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord

of hosts at Shiloh ... On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb. Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year after year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat.

After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. ... She made this vow: 'O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.'

Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel ...

The man Elkanah and all his household went up to offer to the Lord the yearly sacrifice, and to pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, ‘As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, that he may appear in the presence of the Lord, and remain there for ever; I will offer him as a nazirite for all time.’

This is taking place in Shiloh, hundreds of years before the building of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem. Samuel will become a great figure in the history of Israel. The beginnings of that great history, though, are pretty uninspiring. Hannah is jealous of Elkanah’s other wife, Peninnah, because Peninnah has given birth and Hannah has not. Of all the petty, selfish reasons to bring a child into the world, this one has to rank in the top ten. It’s something we see even today, as some high school girls get pregnant because everyone else is doing it. It becomes a status thing. That’s certainly the way it was with Hannah.

Notice that Hannah isn't willing to raise a child. Just giving birth satisfied her need for status. Now she's going to put the child in the care of someone else, Eli in this case. If that doesn't sound familiar, you're not paying attention to our world.

Peninnah drove Hannah nuts by rubbing her nose in the fact that she had no children. Hannah prayed for a child so that she could have some peace from Peninnah's needling, and promised the child to a life as a nazirite, even though that life was not hers to give. Elkanah played his part by telling his wife it was OK to take the child to Eli and leave him there "for his entire life". So, the child, Samuel, conceived from the worst possible motives, abandoned by his mother, comes to live at Shiloh with Eli the priest, and Eli's corrupt sons. None of these folks is operating, it seems to me, from particularly meritorious motives, but all are playing a part in

what will happen. Strange, isn't it? When we read of Samuel's later accomplishments and hear what a great man of power he was, we read right past the parts of his story played out by the lesser lights in the story. That's the way we are. We're limited in that way. God reads every story. We focus only on the main characters. Sometimes, we conclude that if we aren't the main character, what we do is unimportant.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Everything we do is important, down to the last trivial thing, for God reads all stories. The thing we so often forget when we think that our stories, our lives, are unimportant is that we are a part of the story of the world placed here by God for a specific reason. It is quite possible that you will never know the reason, but the world as we know it can not, could not, exist without your contribution. You are unique. You are beloved of God. You are the pinch

of salt which makes the fudge sweeter, the bit of garlic that makes the sauce perfect. Without you, something important would be less than done. You can only celebrate your uniqueness by coming to see yourself as an intrinsic part of a whole that is greater than yourself.

I suppose it would be unfair to leave you without finishing the story of Bob, the brick. He sat for a very long time in a yard. He thought of all that had happened to him, all that he had suffered and overcome, and he readied himself for whatever the next stage in his life would bring. He imagined being part of the capping stone in a cathedral. He thought of himself as the keystone in a graceful arch. In his imagination, Bob soared to heights of creativity and grace never before known to brickdom.

A very long time passed, and the rain fell on Bob, and the snow. The winds blew the snow from him, and

the sun baked him even harder. Soon, he lost some of his sharp edges. They were worn from him leaving him softer, less prideful, more submissive. As he weathered and mellowed, Bob came to understand that even the tiniest, most insignificant contribution of the least of us is made grand in the overall plan. We are not grand by our own efforts. We are celebrated when we play our parts in the great plan of the universe. Slowly, Bob realized that grand places and public approval are just distractions from the matters we should focus on — making our contribution worthy. Stranger still, he saw the suffering he had endured — the water and the dreadful fire — as things that toughened him so that he would be fit for whatever role he was called to. At the last, he was again raised up, and joined countless other bricks as a strong interior firewall on the third floor of a housing project where he could not be seen at all.

And Bob was content.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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