

January 14, 2018
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
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1 Samuel 3:1-10
Psalm 139
1 Corinthians 6:12-20
John 1:43-51

The first chapter of the Gospel of John offers an event- and character-packed 51 verses. The narrator tells us about the Word, and that the Word becomes flesh. John the Baptist anticipates and then recognizes the Messiah. Jesus calls Andrew and Simon. To wrap it up, in the part we just heard, Jesus calls Philip and Nathanael.

If you have anything to do with a seminary, you often hear the word *call*. Seminarians constantly talk about the ministries to which they believe God has called them. If a person is preparing for ordained ministry, they've been talking about this for years, with their sponsoring priest and parishioners, with their bishop and representatives of their diocese, with the person doing their psychiatric evaluation. All those listeners are supposed to authenticate that person's sense of God's call, to affirm—or not—their perception of what's supposed to come next. On a practical level, it's important to make sure they are pursuing ordination for the right reasons, and that they have the emotional and spiritual resources necessary to manage the power *and* vulnerability that come with ordained leadership.

This may be important, but by the time I left home for seminary, I was completely done with being examined; most noticeably, I was completely *bored* with talking about myself. What I didn't anticipate was that, bored or not, the call-talk would continue throughout seminary. You can't avoid it; it's in the air like the fog we had Friday night.

Now that I've had time to get over it, more or less, I would actually like to hear more call-talk—not in a seminary, but right here.

The language of call tends to be something that non-Evangelicals are unfamiliar with. We mainline Protestants, and the Roman Catholics that many of us used to be, tend to talk very about it. I imagine that many are happy leaving things that way; in some ways, it's easier for everybody. Clergy get to keep on running things the way they always have. Lay people get to avoid uncomfortable questions with potentially demanding answers.

We Episcopalians have been rethinking that for a few decades now. But, like many things in the Church, change takes a good long while. Here's a joke:

How many Episcopalians does it take to change a lightbulb?

[I don't know, how many Episcopalians does it take to change a lightbulb?]

Change?

As it turns out, even Episcopalians can change, even if it takes a few decades. Our theology has shifted, and our embrace of the ministry of all the baptized has forced us to think differently about call.

This is MLK weekend. Tomorrow is the 89th anniversary of his birth. It's also worth noting that April 4 will be the 50th anniversary of his death.

On Friday, a group folks from St. Thomas's went to Congregation Mishkan Israel for their annual interfaith worship service honoring the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. There was excellent turnout from St. Thomas's: 6 youth, 4 parents, and 5 other adults, including me. Other people noticed our youth trailing in. I know that because other clergy later they mentioned it to me, saying how great it is that we have youth in our church, *and* that they turned out for the MLK service. One parent heard similar comments from friends and neighbors who attended.

Shortly after we arrived, as I trailed the youth as they entered the sanctuary, Rabbi Herbert Brockman flagged me down. It was then I learned that he had slated me to do a reading and to sit up front with the other participating clergy. There were 15 or 20 of us, representing Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Unitarian Universalist, and Baha'i traditions. Among that number was the retired Roman Catholic bishop of Hartford. I could go on and on about how wonderful and inspiring the service was. I'll offer just two stories.

The guest speaker was Professor Michael Wishnie of Yale Law School. He talked about his work last January: with a group of law students, he successfully fought the first "travel ban"—that is, the executive order preventing U.S. entry by people from particular majority Muslim countries, regardless of whether they had been vetted and cleared for entry. His tale would make a great suspense movie. Remember, it was a Friday. When the executive order was signed, some people were in the air, on flights to the U.S. The flights landed and officials detained them at airports, planning deportation on return flights the next morning.

Working all night. Professor Wishnie's team got a restraining order, first for New York and then nationwide, and all those detained were allowed entry. It was particularly exciting at JFK. When the restraining order came through, a family was on a plane taxiing to the runway. A first-year law student called the airport control tower and talked the staffers into turning around the airplane.

It being an MLK service, we sang "We Shall Overcome." About a verse into it, the rabbi standing next to my right reached for my hand. Then I reached for the hand of the Presbyterian minister to my left, and so it went. We were in several short rows, and those on the ends reached forward or back, so that all of us were joined in a single snaking chain, swaying mostly in unison. It sounds kind of hokey, but it was quite powerful in the moment. I imagined us in a line, marching down the street. I couldn't see the congregation, but I'm told that a large majority of the people put their arms around each other's shoulders for the swaying.

After worship, despite being sought out by so many others, Rabbi Herb made a few minutes to spend with our youth. He had been doing social justice work since the 1960s. I said this to him, "You've been doing justice work for a long time."

And he said, “It’s *religious* work.”

I agreed, adding, “And there’s still a lot to do.”

He replied with something close to this: “You can’t look at all that. You just have to help the person next to you.”

“Yeah,” I said, and slightly paraphrasing a saying from the Talmud, “because if you save one life you save the world.”

“That’s right,” he said. And he noted that a similar saying is also in the Koran.

Before we met, on opposite sides of the country, my wife, Jakki, and I spent a lot of time and energy working for rights for same-sex couples: I worked in Seattle on domestic partner benefits, and Jakki worked in Vermont on civil unions. At that time, the late 1990s and into the 2000s, domestic partner benefits were still rare, and no government entity anywhere in the world offered same-sex couples the same benefits and responsibilities as different-sex couples. Neither of us called ourselves Christians at that time, though we had both been dabbling in Unitarian Universalism. Whatever we called ourselves, looking back, I believe that we were called us to that work. I won’t go into details, but in my case, God spoke to me through the words of an NPR reporter.

A couple of weeks ago, Jakki and I were walking downtown on a cold afternoon. Walking ahead of us was a pair of young women in their 20s, arm in arm, heads inclined toward one another, clearly *together*, safe, confident, the prospect of a happy future unfolding before them. It was a very different future than the one I could imagine at that age, a vision that kept me in the closet until I could no longer breathe.

That image stayed in my mind. I later said to Jakki, “It makes me so happy to see how those young people have such a different experience of the world than we did at their age. And *we* helped make that possible.” Mind you, we didn’t do it alone, we didn’t do anything heroic. But we each made our own droplet of a contribution, which combined with the droplets of so many others, to create tsunami of change. *And*, we lived to see first-hand how that change has made a difference in the lives of people we love and people we will never know. How amazing is that.

In the first chapter of John, Jesus begins staffing up. Andrew and Simon and Philip and Nathanael are the first of many. Jesus looked at Nathanael and learned everything he needed to know; Jesus spoke to Nathanael and told him exactly what he needed to do.

You might say that, even today, Jesus is staffing up. It doesn’t happen exactly the way that Jesus called Nathanael. Still, we might remember the words of the psalmist:

LORD, you have searched me out and known me; *
you know my sitting down and my rising up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.

Through the incarnation, the light of God is born into the darkness. At the Epiphany, the light of Christ is revealed to the world. In this season after the Epiphany, God invites each one of us to consider and reconsider what it means to carry that light.

It's not really about ordination; it's not even really about Church. Ideally, we connect the dots, from the things we hear God saying, to every aspect of our lives.

It would be easier if it was always as simple as Jesus pointing and saying, "You! Here!" In my experience, it is very occasionally much like that, a flash fire of realization. But also in my experience, for every moment that feels like a flash fire, there are years and years of burning embers. For some, there are only embers. It works either way. Flash fire or embers, God lures us with the warmth. With God's grace, we tilt our candle to the glow. And we walk forward carrying the light of Christ.