

2nd Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B

(Covid Pandemic, record number of deaths in a day, President Trump impeached for the 2nd time, Windstorm in Spokane, MLK Jr. Weekend)

1st Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-5; 12-17

1st Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

Arlen Farley

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Lord, you have searched me out and known me;
you know my sitting down and my rising up;
You discern my thoughts from afar...
I will thank you because I am marvelously made;
Your works are wonderful and I know it well.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

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Friends, God knows us and God loves us in these uncertain times.
We are fearfully and wonderfully made, You and I.
Not just Samuel, whose mother Hannah set him in the temple to serve the LORD as a child,
Not just Philip and Nathaniel, who were called by Jesus himself.
Not just Martin Luther King Jr., who I learned this week¹ wrote his letter from a Birmingham Jail
not only to white moderate christians in general, but to some white, southern Episcopal
bishops in particular.

Think about it. God even loves Christian leaders who are invested in white supremacy. With his
birthday so close, we observe that God loves them enough to send them and us Martin Luther
King, Jr.

I know it goes without saying for some of you that God loves Johan Sebastian Bach so let me
say that it's quite obvious to me that God also loves Jackson Brown and Maggie Rogers.
But they aren't the only ones who are fearfully and wonderfully made. You and I are as well.

Even if our parents are blind to it and the people we used to be married to can't see it.
Even if our teachers and friends want something different from us then God has made us to be,
God knows us. God loves us.

Of course God loves Jesus, but we confess in some of the oldest and best language we have
that Jesus is the only begotten and beloved son of the Father - the one through whom all
things were made - so in loving Jesus - God loves everything there is. Including us.

Not just Mother Theresa or our older siblings with the raw talent and the good grades.
God loves us.
We are fearfully and wonderfully made.

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That said, the sons of Eli were scoundrels. I swear that is how they are introduced in 1st
Samuel, a chapter or so before today's Old Testament lesson. Scripture is disorienting that
way, and unsystematic. One minute you are hearing a psalm about God's creative and intimate

¹ <https://twitter.com/WilGafney/status/1349938033353781248>

expression of care for every person and the next you are hearing about the scoundrel adult children of an ancient priest. We are loved, and we are three dimensional characters in a stories with clear points of view and literary agendas.

Eli's sons really were scoundrels. People like Hannah came to the Temple with real vulnerabilities and real needs. She was a barren woman in a polygamous marriage. Her husband's other wife was fertile. She reminded Hannah of this often. It was a constant source of shame and sorrow in Hannah's life and Hannah came to the Temple to pray about it.

Eli's sons responded to people like Hannah with the fiercest and most depraved cynicism. They stole the gifts people offered in good faith at the Temple's altar, taking the most valuable parts for themselves instead of offering them to God and on behalf of others. When people had the courage to challenge them, they responded with threats of violence. To their violence and self-dealing, they added sexual assault. 1st Samuel tells us that Eli's sons used their spiritual authority in the community to sexually assault women at the entrance of the Temple.

They really were scoundrels. You can imagine how that happens when children grow up at the center of a cultic and spiritual power the way they did, feeling wholly entitled to the power they grew into. Of course this still happens. Virtue doesn't magically pass from one generation to the next.

Eli, himself a priest, and one who knew the LORD, did not love his sons or God enough to confront them with the truth.

But according to 1st Samuel, God heard Hannah's prayer in the Temple in spite of Eli's scoundrel sons. Hannah had a son named Samuel. Even though he was all she had in this world, she presented her son back to God, giving him over to service within the Temple Courts. What a wild contrast - Samuel growing up knowing the great faith and sacrifice of his Mother for the faith the Temple represented - and Eli mentoring Samuel in service in the presence of his own son's barbaric cynicism.

That's the context in which Samuel hears the call of the LORD and the context in which Eli helps Samuel to recognize it is the LORD calling. It was a confusing time to listen for the voice of the God of Israel.

Eli's vision was growing dim - he was aging - Samuel was asleep in the presence of the lamp of the LORD, the Lamp which was always lit in the night watch to symbolize the divine presence.

The LORD tells Samuel that there will be justice and judgment on Eli's house. That's the first message Samuel receives and is charged to deliver to Eli. Eli doesn't even get the message directly. He gets it from his young apprentice, Samuel. Of course Samuel is fearful to tell Eli this, but I love Eli's commitment to truth. He insists that Samuel tell him exactly what the LORD has told him.

In these Sundays after Epiphany our collects, these corporate seasonal prayers we pray, call us to pray for wider and wider illumination. If we are to have our prayers answered we will need to move beyond the cynicism of Eli's family and the fear of Samuel.

It's certainly healthy to have a cynical distance from the scoundrel sons of Eli, but cynicism has a way of offering us a wider and wider scope of darkness instead of illumination. Cynicism breeds self-righteousness and then attracts self-justification. Cynicism makes us wonder if a good God is really lighting and warming our way, enables us to treat others the way we have been treated, and finally leaves us alone in the dark.

Alongside the cynicism of Eli's sons is the legitimate fear of Samuel. He doesn't want to tell Eli the truth. The truth is too difficult. He lays in bed all night rather than tell Eli the truth. We can imagine Samuel feeling like this truth is too threatening to the relationship, too divisive, that perhaps he should wait for a more opportune time. Samuel could certainly have justified keeping the truth to himself and just continuing to work on a shared project with Eli.

You might say Samuel was having his, "Southern Episcopal Bishop moment with Dr. King." Thank God King did not let his fear keep him from speaking the truth about race, about poverty, about war. He loved us enough to tell us.

Thank God Eli asked for the truth at the end of his life, the truth about his sons and the truth about his complicity in their actions. Though the bad news seems bad in a permanent kind of way for Eli, we should know that the prophetic language of permanence is often more "rhetorically performative" than "literally accurate" in the Old Testament (and maybe the New Testament as well). What seems set in stone in the scriptures later gushes living water.

The only things that really endure forever are the love and mercy of God. But cynicism and fear and will try to keep us from them.

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Nathaniel, of our gospel lesson, isn't cynical or afraid. He is biased and judgmental. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?," he asks. His otherwise trustworthy friend, Philip, has fallen in with a Rabbi from a place he doesn't trust.

Philip takes a track with Nathaniel that is pretty clever. Rather than challenging his prejudice head on, he tells him to simply, "come and see." I do love the quote from Marilyn Robinson, which I have probably already offered in a sermon and will probably do so again. "Nothing true can be said about God from a posture of defense."² "Come and see."

What Nathaniel sees is that Jesus has already seen him. "Where did you get to know me?!", Nathaniel asks in surprise. "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you," Jesus responds.

Jesus saw Nathaniel before Nathaniel ever came and saw for himself. So it is with all of us seeking illumination. If we are willing to have enough faith to push past our judgement, we will often realize that the only thing keeping us from seeing the one who sees us is our learned judgments themselves.

Cynicism and fear, judgment, bias, discrimination, and fear - They will all keep us in the dark.

They killed Eli's sons. They killed Jesus. They killed Martin Luther King Jr. They will kill our democracy. They will kill our families and relationships. They will kill our church. They will keep us from the illumination we are praying for.

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The ever widening light of epiphany is the light of Truth, the light of Christ, the light which Samuel guards as a young child in the temple, the light which illumines Philip and which he shares with Nathaniel, the light that made Martin a fire for truth. Cynicism and fear, judgment

² From her Novel, "Gilead."

and bias are the darkening and narrowing of vision that keeps us from hearing the good news of the psalmist.

God loves Nathaniel, and Philip, and Samuel, and Eli, and even Eli's scoundrel sons.

God loves us - you and I in these uncertain times - and all creation.

We are fearfully and wonderfully made.

God loves you and wants to illumine your way - past cynicism and discrimination, judgement and fear.

You are loved.

O Lord, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar...such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain to it. Amen.