

Second Sunday after the Epiphany – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony 1.17.21

1 Samuel 3:1-20, Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17, 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, John 1:43-51

The most recent days have been days filled with violence, fear, insurrection and hatred. A gallows and noose were erected and a chant to hang Vice-President Mike Pence as a traitor was heard repeatedly. Late last year there was news of a plot to kidnap and try Michigan governor, Gretchen Whitmer. All of this is bad, scary news. We have all heard through one source or another of the harrowing hours spent by our elected officials and their staff and reporters locked down.

This coming week there will be an inauguration in Washington D.C. President elect Joseph Biden will be sworn in as President, an action that has occurred with every President in our entire history. There are rumors of threats and violence that intend to disrupt this process. More of the same bad and scary news.

Where does that leave us, you and me, as people of faith? Does it leave us in our homes, fearful of the days ahead, or does it leave us confident that death and destruction, hatred and violence will be overcome? Where is the gospel, literally the good news in these days? How do we, as people of faith, as people who follow the teachings of Jesus, how do we respond? What does the Prince of Peace say to us, individually and corporately about our willingness to act on what we profess to believe? These are questions that each of us must answer for ourselves. They are questions which bear prayerful thought and conversation.

What is happening in our country is no longer about right and left, about liberal and conservative. This is no longer about civilly disagreeing. This is about a real and serious threat to our way of life in a democracy. This is a very real and serious threat to our being what we have always professed to be, “one people under God.” No matter how you acknowledge God, be it as a Jew, a Muslim a Christian, a Hindu or any one of a multitude of other faiths and ethical beliefs, we are being called by God because of our shared humanity to clearly and strongly recognize in this moment the need for justice, accountability and responsibility. The voice of God is calling us. To those who are Christians, the voice of God is heard in scripture and in the words of Jesus.

The gospel writer John tells of the coming of Jesus into Galilee in the early days of his ministry. He finds Philip and says to him: “Follow me.” Two simple words that changed the life of the one to whom they were spoken. Two simple words, follow me, that have changed the lives of saints and sinners for centuries since. Two simple words.

Those are the words that Jesus continues to say to each one of us, and has consistently said to everyone who identifies themselves as Christians, as followers of Christ. Not only believe in me, but follow me. Follow me, not blindly without thought or question, but follow me because it is what God calls us to do.

Philip finds Nathanael who is skeptical of this new rabbi. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” As much as that was a question posed to Philip, it is a crucial and essential question

for today. A more contemporary version of the same question would be “can anything good come out of the months and days we have lived through recently?” And if the answer to that contemporary question is “yes” then the inescapable corollary is “How”?

There is much to be gleaned from the story of Samuel a small part of which we read today as our Hebrew scripture. The story of Samuel is the story of God calling one who was a child, small and powerless to be the agent of great change. In this time, I particularly identify with Samuel, small and powerless and yet it is through this young boy that the powerful priest Eli and his sons lost their power. The one whom God called, Samuel, prevailed. Prevailed because he was willing to listen and to respond.

When Samuel first heard the voice of God, he did not recognize it for what it was. It was only after repeatedly hearing the same voice repeatedly that Samuel was able to reply “speak, for your servant is listening.” Listening: in the days ahead we will be called to do much listening and we may not at first see a clear path. The lesson of Samuel is to keep on listening and responding speak Lord until we can see what is our next step. With the help of God, the weak can speak truth to the powerful and if enough hear the voice of God and respond, the community of the weak become strong enough to overcome the powerful. It will take time and we will need to continue to grow in the ability to listen for God’s leading and the ability to take the actions that will bring about the justice that God seeks. This is the work of healing. Healing must always start with naming the wrong or the hurt, and listening for the words of healing God has for us. A new beginning is made possible when the call of God is met with willing human response. The call is always present, it is the willing response that is necessary for change.

To be clear, responding to the call of God is a very personal and individual action. It is the faithful measuring of our thoughts and actions against the commandment to love that guides each person. There is room for disagreement, even sharp disagreement but always supported by love.

There is another side to God’s love, the side of God’s justice. One cannot truly exist without the other. Both are necessary to create the space in which human beings can live together in peace. When we are living as God intends us to live, we experience both love and justice in equal measure.

Peace does not mean we will all agree about the way in which the world should be managed. We will not all agree. But we can all hold our points of view, express them and then by majority rule accept the way forward. That is the way of justice. Majority rule does not mean we have the right to trample over the wants, needs, and desires of those who are in the minority. To do so is not the way of love.

To begin anew, to move toward a world of peace, justice and love where everyone is heard and valued, and where disagreement does not mean violence or destruction means that we must first facing together where we have failed. This is a painful and difficult process. Here too the definition of failure may not be uniform. But before we can move to a new place, a new beginning we must acknowledge where we have been and what mistakes we have made.

Today is the second Sunday after the Epiphany, the time when we celebrate the new light of Christ which has come into the world. The light in recent days may have seemed a bit tarnished a bit dim. It is in human listening and speaking, in human hearing and acting in accordance with the voice of God the light of hope will shine into a dark and disheartened world. Are you willing to speak the words of Samuel in earnest prayer? "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."