

“God Is Not in the Dark”

Pastor Jim Cords

January 17, 2021

The holy gospel according to John, the first chapter:

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Come, follow me.” Philip was from Bethsaida, Andrew and Peter's hometown.

Philip went to look for Nathanael and told him, “We have found the person Moses and the prophets wrote about! His name is Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

“Nazareth!” exclaimed Nathanael. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

“Come and see for yourself,” Philip replied.

As they approached, Jesus said, “Now here is a genuine son of Israel - a man of complete integrity.”

“How do you know about me?” Nathanael asked.

Jesus replied, “I could see you under the fig tree before Phillip found you.”

Then Nathanael exclaimed, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God - the king of Israel!”

Jesus asked him, “Do you believe this just because I told you I had seen you under a fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” Then He said, “I tell you the truth, you will all see heaven open and the angels of God going up and down on the Son of Man, the One who is the stairway between heaven and earth.”

The gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, Your word is such a gift to us. We thank You for Your people throughout the history of scripture and we pray that You would enlighten us today by how You responded to them and by how You are responding to us in our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I have enjoyed looking at these texts this week. I have found them encouraging and my hope is that you will also find them encouraging as God brings light into the darkness of your life and of our world. We start today by looking at Samuel and his calling. We read these words. “Now in

those days messages from the Lord were very rare, and visions were quite uncommon. One night Eli, who was almost blind by now, had gone to bed. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was sleeping in the temple near the Ark of God.”

This is the beginning of the calling of the prophet Samuel. There's a great deal of symbolism here. Eli's vision is dimming. He's almost blind, but he's not blind. On the other hand, the word of the Lord was rare. That means it was not nonexistent, but it was rare. There is a parallel that's happening here between Eli's vision and God making Himself known in the world. Both are diminished. That's the setting and the temple light has not yet gone out just as God's making Himself known has not yet gone out. Of course, the other meaning of the lamp of God has not yet gone out means the sun has not yet risen. That is, it's still late at night or very early in the morning. I love to think about that in terms of the sun had not yet risen. There was sort of a foreshadowing of that which is ahead for us.

Samuel is serving Eli, kind of as an adopted son. He hears God speak, but he doesn't recognize God's voice. “Samuel!” Samuel runs to Eli and says “Here I am for you called me” and Eli says “I didn't call you. Go back to bed.” Again, Samuel runs to Eli, “Here I am for you called me.” “No, I didn't call you. Go back to bed.” Comes again. “Here I am for you called me” and Eli then after three times, realizes *oh wait a minute; maybe God is showing up; maybe God is speaking* and so he says to Samuel to go and if you hear that voice again, say, “speak LORD, for your servant is listening.” *Speak LORD, for your servant is listening.* Eli, even though his vision is dim, even though he has not heard often from God recently, recognizes - it took a while, but recognizes that God might be showing up. He gives Samuel who doesn't know God is speaking, this amazing instruction to respond to the voice of God. “Speak LORD for your servant is listening.”

Now it's interesting because God does show up again. God does call Samuel a fourth time, but Samuel's response is “Speak for your servant is listening.” He doesn't use the name of God. He doesn't use “LORD.” Some say it's because he wasn't sure it was the Lord and so he left that part out. Others say he was showing ultimate respect for God by not using the name of the Lord. But what I want to say to you is he made himself available. Almost as if he was saying Lord, if it's You, speak and I will listen.

This is a handing off of the mantle. Eli is soon no longer to be and Samuel will take on the role of the prophet. He will be the spokesperson for God. Though at this point, at this time, he doesn't know the Lord, the Lord is making Himself known and so Eli is ready to hand off to Samuel, knowing that Samuel has been chosen by God to be the new prophet.

What might our response be? How often when the Holy Spirit prompts you in your life, do you say to yourself “That’s God. I’m sure of it.” That’s not very common for me. More often, it’s I think God might be trying to tell me something. I’m not sure. I don’t know it but to respond by faith in a similar way to Samuel. Speak and I will listen. I’m open, God, to what You might want to say in my life. Lord, I’m listening. In the darkness of our world, in the darkness of our experience, in the doubt and uncertainty of our minds, it reminds me of the person who responded to Jesus by saying, “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.” Speak Lord and I will do my best to open my life to Your prompting. I will seek to be obedient to You.

In the background of the story of Eli and Samuel, we recognize that Eli has been somewhat disobedient, especially in the way he has raised his sons. So God doesn’t choose his sons to carry the mantle. Rather, He gives it to Samuel who is ready and willing to listen and be guided by the voice of God, through the rest of his life as the Lord makes Himself known. That can be our posture as well as we think about our own life.

Then we shift. We see that God has called Samuel to be a prophet and then in our gospel lesson, we learn about Jesus calling Philip and Nathanael. It’s an amazing story! Jesus comes to Philip and Philip is eager. “Come follow me,” Jesus says. Philip is just excited and he runs off to find his friend, Nathanael. He tells Nathanael that he has met the Messiah. He has found the One, the very person that Moses and the prophets wrote about. He tells him His name is Jesus; He’s the son of Joseph from Nazareth. Philip has not only responded with faith, recognizing who Jesus is, that He is this Messiah, not just this man from Nazareth. He goes. He’s excited to bear witness to that recognition.

Nathanael, on the other hand, has some questions. Nathanael is not at all sure. It doesn’t make sense that the Messiah, the king in the line of David would come from Nazareth. I mean, bad enough coming from the little town of Bethlehem, but at least that’s in the line of David. Nazareth, that nothing town? No, not good enough.

And so Philip responds. Philip responds by saying “come and see for yourself” Now, the “for yourself” is in the NLT, but really in the Greek, it’s “come and see.” We can read that as a simple invitation, or we can understand the deeper calling that’s in those words. The word “come” is in Greek *Erchomai*, and it really is “to move toward or up to something.” There can be an inference of letting go of where one is and going to a new place, being willing to move and to discover a new condition, from our old place, our old condition, to a new place and a new condition. It’s to let go of those things, those preconceptions when you come and see. The word, *Erchomai* is Phillip saying to Nathanael, at least come and take a look, consider that this possibility might be true.

And then the word “to see,” *Eidon*, is not simply to physically see, but, just as we discovered in Eli's dimness of sight, and God not speaking often, there's a recognition in seeing. It's not just to catch a glimpse and notice that something is there, but rather to understand its meaning, to discover its truth. See it. Really see it and comprehend it.

So that becomes very exciting as Philip invites him to come and discover the life-changing introduction to the Messiah who's been promised from long ago. The promise of God is finally real. Philip is so excited! Nathaniel, you've got to come and experience the truth of the Messiah. He is here. He is with us. Come and see. And that's very exciting. Nathanael is ready to go. Even though Jesus is from Nazareth, even though he has some doubts. He's ready to go and check it out.

But something happens. Even before Nathanael sees Jesus, Jesus saw Nathanael. While he was coming, Jesus *saw* Nathanael. His response in seeing, in comprehending, in recognizing the truth of who Nathanael was and would be, Jesus says, “Behold an Israelite indeed!” and the ESV puts it this way, “in whom there is no deceit.” Now, this is really interesting, especially in light of our discussion in these weeks of Jesus is the light of the world, the light in the darkness because a part of our understanding of darkness is deceit. It's being deceived, being unable to know the truth. And so, Jesus declares of Nathanael, as he's coming and before he sees, that He can see that there is no darkness or deceit preventing him from seeing who Jesus is.

Well, Nathanael wonders how can Jesus say this about me? How does Jesus know him? Somehow in Jesus' declaration, Nathaniel knows, that is, he now comprehends that he has been seen by Jesus, that he is known. And in that knowing, he is transformed because immediately he declares the truth of who Jesus is. “You are the Son of God.”

It is an amazing statement of faith coming from these few words in this encounter. We see that played off in the gospel because Jesus, of course, responds what you know that because I saw you under the fig tree? Greater things will you *see*, greater things will you understand about Me. In fact, I am going to bring heaven and earth back together, the division between the world and heaven, the place of people and the place of God will be brought together because Jesus will be the stairway. Jesus will be the way and the truth and the life for all who see, recognize who He is. He is the Savior. He is the Redeemer. And He is the Lord whom we serve.

1 Samuel 3:7 says that Samuel did not yet know the Lord and yet, in the story, we see that the Lord knows Samuel. The Lord comes to Samuel and calls him by name. There are people in our world who would say they don't know God. Some would even say they're seeking God. They

want to know. Others, of course, say they don't believe at all. But just as the Lord knew and called Samuel, and just as Jesus knew and called Philip and Nathanael, God knows us. He *sees* us and calls us.

Jonna's sermon last week was brilliant. Insightful. God spoke great wisdom through her when she suggested that in this light, in this calling of God, we recognize our inadequacies and our move at that moment is to confession, so that God can move with redemption. God's understanding of who He can make us to be in Christ becomes our identity, becomes our name. Samuel was young and didn't recognize God's voice and yet God chose him and used him and transformed him. He'll do the same for us.

Also in our reading this week was Psalm 139. "Search me, O God, and know my heart." Perhaps that is a psalmist's confession. Search me, God, and know everything about me. I recognize when God searches me, when He searches my heart not everything He finds there will be light and goodness. In fact, when I hear the words that there's nowhere to hide from God, there's no way I can take those parts of my life that I'm ashamed of or feel guilty about and keep them tucked away. God knows me. Without Jesus, that's terrifying. Without grace and mercy, that's terrifying. As Jonna said last week, we are inadequate. We do fall short. Yet there is such beauty in Psalm 139 because, in the wonder of that psalm, we hear this declaration that God has known us from before we were born. He saw me before I was born. He knows who I am.

God knows who you are and His response to all of who you are is to pour out His blessing upon you, to begin the work of transformation that happens when you recognize who He is, when you *come and see*, when you let go of where you're stuck and trapped in your own experience and doubt and you open the possibility. Speak Lord, for your servant listens. God will speak and His words will transform. They will change our hearts. It will allow God to live in and through us. God knows you and He chooses you. God knows me and He's chosen me.

It's too good almost to believe. It's certainly more than I can fully grasp, except for by faith in the goodness of who God is, by faith in the promise of who God is. If I keep looking to myself, I keep falling short. If I keep asking the question can I do it, the answer is always no. I'll never be able to succeed, but God will always be able to succeed. God is not in the darkness. God is not in the dark. God comes to the darkness to cast it away. He comes to the darkness of our doubt, to the darkness in our sin and brokenness, so that He can chase it out, so that He can begin the work of transformation that comes through Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Does it happen all at once? Well if it did, we would probably go blind just like a bright light in our face, but God is able to speak into our lives. Because He knows us, He knows how to move us.

He knows how to draw us away from those things that bind us, so that we can see the truth, that He sees us, that He knows us, and that He loves us.

We live in a world where there are many around us who when they think God sees, they expect judgment. They somehow hope to live in the denial of their sin and brokenness. They don't want to confess it. That's an awful idea in their minds. But Jesus sees them and knows them and loves them. When we can allow them to see that that is true in our lives, when we, like Philip, can see who Jesus is for us and in us and for our eternity, we too can go and bear witness. We too can go and be spokespersons for God, as Samuel was, so that the evidence of God's presence is no longer rare in our time because God will speak through those who are His witnesses. And like Phillip, we say to our friends *come and see*. Or maybe we say come and be seen and be known and be loved by the Savior. Thanks be to God. Amen.