

Series: Becoming the People of God
Sermon: Your Servant is Listening
Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:1-20 and John 1:43-51

January 14, 2024
Rev. Karen H Roberts

The New York Times once published an article ridiculing the idea that humans could ever achieve flight. They weren't the only cynics. Even the father of Orville and Wilbur, Milton Wright, a bishop in the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, had told his sons that if God had intended man to fly, he would have given him wings. The New York Times article predicted that, even if humans could overcome the "embarrassing relationship between weight and the strength of inorganic material," it would still take mathematics and technology about one to ten MILLION years to achieve such folly...yet only 9 weeks later, at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, Wilbur Wright took to the air and flew...humanity had grown wings.

Earlier cynics predicted the automobile's top speed of 15 mph would induce a hysteria that would threaten the world as we knew it...and later cynics predicted that the internet was a fad that wouldn't last. Still others didn't believe that one man could spark a civil rights movement based upon non-violence and love that would forever impact American society, and yet tomorrow we will celebrate the birthday of that man, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dreams are often met with cynicism...but thank God we have dreams and people willing to step up and achieve them.

Talking about these cynics makes me realize that Nathaniel might be the most relatable of all New Testament people. We understand his cynicism because we understand how it is easier to doubt in a dream than dare to hope in one. Nathaniel had lived his whole life in the political turmoil of the Roman occupation. He had heard of the historic revolts of his people and the horrific aftermath of their failures. He had, no doubt, suffered disappointment time and again as he had hoped that God would deliver his people, yet little seemed to change. So, it isn't hard to imagine that when Philip bumped into Nathaniel on the street and said, "Come with me! We've found the one God has sent...the Messiah...he's from Nazareth," well...Nathaniel was a bit cynical. I would have been like us hearing a neighbor say, "Come with me! We've found one sent by God, it's Billy and Betty's boy from up in Boomer." Nothing at all against the lovely people of Boomer, I'm just saying that none of us really expect God to show up in the ordinary places in which we travel and live. Nathaniel, a Cana boy, just wasn't going to buy that God was hanging out over in Nazareth. "No way," he says, "he couldn't have been living this close and nothing changed around here!" But Philip says, "come and see," and amazingly Nathaniel does. I don't know that he did it hoping to be proven wrong...more than likely he thought he would have a bit of fun poking holes in Philip's hope...that's what cynics enjoy, after all...but he went...at least he went...and it changed his life.

I'm not sure it was cynicism that had afflicted Eli and the Temple order he was charged to uphold, but certainly, from the Old Testament story we learn that no one was daring to dream

or hope that God was going to show up in their lives. Look at vs 1 of the 1 Samuel text: The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. Eli was old and appears to have given up on any passion he might have had for seeking God. His sons were running amok and had created chaos in the temple, disrespecting God with their selfish ways and Eli has not stopped them. Eli is defeated, God is silenced, and in the midst of it all is little Samuel.

You might remember Samuel is the son of Hannah, who came to the temple yearly to pray desperately for a child. When she finally gave birth to a son, she named him Samuel, which means “heard by God,” and raised him until he was weaned and then, she took him to the temple and gave him back to God...he lived at the temple with Eli, a servant for the Lord. So, that is why Samuel is there, sleeping in the shadow of the Ark...he was the one who cared for Eli, who trimmed the candles and filled the oil lamps, and tended the holy places as Eli had taught him...quietly working...faithfully serving...diligently listening for any call of help from Eli. Eli, no doubt, had taught Samuel much...except how to recognize the voice of God. And maybe that is a failure far too many churches share in. These two stories, centuries apart yet timelessly connected, remind us of the power of expectation. Eli had not taught Samuel to expect anything from God except achieving the daily work required at the temple. Missing from his lessons was the expectation that God might have something to say, a dream to share, a calling to impart, a purpose to hand down. The word of the Lord was rare in those days and the visions were not widespread. Could it be that God had plenty to say and show, but was having trouble finding anyone willing to listen and look! Certainly, Eli’s sons held no expectations of God. Eli once had but had been worn down. Yet God found a quiet moment with a quiet child whose quiet mother had prayed for him and dedicated him to God. In the quiet stillness God spoke...Samuel heard...and answered. Maybe it was because he was a child, but Samuel isn’t afflicted with Nathaniel’s cynicism or Eli’s weariness, or Eli’s son’s self-indulgence. Samuel’s whole life has been focused on serving God, so he doesn’t seem to have any hesitancy in believing that God is the one calling to him...he is ready....Here I am.

I can’t help but think about the differences in Samuel and Nathaniel. Samuel lived every moment of his life knowing that he was a blessing, prayed for and received. He knew, from the visits of his mother and the stories of his priest, that God had a hand in his life...God had something to say...God had something to show. Nathaniel lived every moment of his life wondering when God was going to show up...when was God going to speak. Nathaniel was feeling a bit like Eli, maybe, thinking God’s voice had grown unrecognizable and glimpses too few and far between. Samuel was shaped by the story of his birth, raised to trust because he is proof God could be trusted. Nathaniel was shaped by the world’s insistence that God had grown silent and remained hidden. Samuel was able to hear...Nathaniel could only doubt. Yet, when Nathaniel went with Philip, Jesus spoke, and Nathaniel heard...Jesus came, and Nathaniel saw. Jesus invited and Nathaniel followed. I often wonder if the difference here is in the ability to tune out the noise of the world and be still enough to hear...quiet enough to listen. When is the last time you did that? Embraced the quiet...intentionally sat still and said, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”

It seems a bit puzzling how quickly Nathaniel changes his mind about Jesus. One minute his making snide remarks about Jesus' hometown and the next he is calling him Rabbi. The game changer seems to be that Jesus has seen Nathaniel "sitting under a fig tree," which I've read is a Jewish metaphor for sitting and studying or reflecting on scripture. Perhaps Jesus is saying to Nathaniel, "I know you because I know you are expecting me...I know you have been studying the scriptures about me...I know you are waiting...Here I am." Maybe Samuel and Nathaniel aren't that different after all...both are expectant that God will show up and act...but Nathaniel has let his hope get drowned out in the noise of the world around him...he was cynical that he would ever get to hear or see what God could do.

Do you ever feel that way? I think many of us do at one time or another. We listen to the chaos and bickering and bad news of the world around us and too easily decide that God has nothing to say about any of it. I can't help but wonder, if someone were writing the story about our moment in time, if they would begin with... The word of the Lord was rare in those days and visions were not widespread. I can't help but wonder if churches are emptier because too many people have lost the expectation that God has something to say...something to reveal. Yet, we know that isn't true...a living God always has something to say...something to reveal...some purpose...some invitation...some sign of presence to bring hope, peace, love, and joy into the world. Surely we know that is true, don't we? Maybe the lesson we get from these stories is two-fold: First, a reminder to never stop listening. God speaks. God calls. God, is the still, quiet voice that knows our name and whispers it in our darkest night. But the second lesson is vital as well...never stop speaking what you hear God say.

What if Philip had just dismissed Nathaniel's cynicism and walked away? What if he had thought, "Wow, he probably thinks I'm a fool. I'll just say goodbye and get on my way." But he didn't. He invited him...come and see. Philip knew what he had heard God say, that Jesus was the one and he was not going to be shy about telling Nathaniel about it.

Church...we need to know that God still speaks. We need to expect that God still has a purpose in which God calls us and a path for which to achieve it. We need to expect that God still has things to reveal to us and light to show us all that needs to be seen.

We also need to be the bold voice that can speak to the cynical world and say, "Hey, listen to what we've heard...come see what we have seen." This is our dual role: Listener and Proclaimer...hearer and speaker...believer and cynic willing to come and see, listen and obey.

God has plenty to say to us...and becoming the people of God means we are ready to listen and follow.