

Holy Covenant – Second Sunday After Epiphany – 18 January 2015

Sarah Bachelard

1 Samuel 3: 1-10; Ps 139; 1 Corinthians 6: 12-20; John 1: 43-51

Who am I? Who am I becoming? Who and whose am I called to be? Our readings today open up these most profound questions of our human journey – and I notice in them two fundamental assumptions.

First, who I am, who you are, is known by God – and in God, the whole of your life, past, present and future is held. In one sense – although it's almost impossible to get our heads around – we are told that in God, we are already who we will be. The psalmist writes: 'My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed' (Ps. 139. 15-16). The same faith is implicitly expressed in the story of Samuel, who was dedicated by his mother Hannah before he was even a twinkle in her eye (or in his father's eye, for that matter); Samuel was known to God before he himself knew anything of 'the word of the Lord'. And again, in our gospel reading, it's because Jesus knows Nathanael before he has met him that Nathanael recognises Jesus as Son of God. God knows who we are.

But do we know who we are? Do we know what God knows? The second assumption of these readings is that who I am in God is (at some level) hidden from me. In order to realise who I am, I must entrust myself to a journey of unknowing – growing into an identity that I can't just construct or control. And in my experience that's not altogether straightforward. There's been plenty of heartache, dead-ends and strange turns, frustration and time taken, together with delight, wonder and surprise – I have the sense it's not over yet, and I imagine you know that too. The journey to become ourselves, it seems, is necessarily a vulnerable way. Nathanael is seen right through and goes with Jesus – without having the least inkling of what he

is getting into, and Samuel offers himself naively, 'Here I am', to the one who mysteriously addresses him.

What I find exciting about all this – especially as we begin a new year – is how it suggests our lives, our selves, are neither fixed in advance such that I have nothing to contribute – I just live out a pre-determined script. And yet, nor is it completely up to me, as if I have to generate myself arbitrarily, out of nothing, without any direction or support. Instead, there's this dynamic interplay between call and response, freedom and answerability, creativity and obedience, passion and action. A crucial part of discipleship, it seems to me, is about this very journey, and the story of Samuel offers unusual insight into how we might engage with its invitation.

The first thing I noticed reading the story this time, and it surprised me, was the extraordinary emphasis on 'lying down' – did you notice? Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see (and that seems like a pretty significant metaphor suggesting it's time to pass on the prophetic mantle), was lying down in his room; meanwhile, Samuel is also lying down in the temple of the Lord. The Lord calls, 'Samuel, Samuel' and he runs to Eli, who tells him to 'lie down again'. A second and a third time, he runs to Eli mistaking the Lord's call for his, and a second and third time, he is told to 'lie down again'. Six times in 9 verses, Samuel or Eli lies down – and in a story about the call to prophetic action, that seems like a lot of lying about. (Hardly the frenetic program of your average Anglican parish!) What to make of it?

A couple of thoughts. For me, 'lying down' symbolises liminality – the relaxed, slightly ill-defined liminal space between full wakefulness and being completely out of it (notice Eli doesn't tell Samuel to 'go back to sleep'). When we lie down we slow down, we let down – not only our bodies, but our minds. New thoughts occur, unexpected connections, dreamy messages ... Could it be that being open to the voice of God involves having our grip loosened on the way we hold things, and know things, the way we know ourselves? [*whisper*] *Samuel...Samuel...* Could really hearing our name, involve forgetting who we know (or think we know) ourselves to be? ...

Lying down involves a kind of letting go ... but not completely. The lying down of discipleship is an intentional passivity – a posture of vulnerability, of susceptibility... a posture that opens the way for God.

And for me too, this image of 'lying down' is a reminder that at certain times in life, there is nothing more we can 'do' – all that's left is to rest, to wait In the story, Eli has just been told by God that his family is under judgement because of the corruption of his two sons, his house is in crisis. The priesthood of Israel will be taken away, his sons will die. So what does Eli do? He lies down. And when eventually he realises that Samuel is being addressed by God, his instruction to him is the same – go back to your place, lie down, wait. Any action, at this point, must be God's action; any activity of ours must proceed from listening, from hearing the word of the Lord.

So that's one thing. But, as the story also suggests – as if you need to be told, hearing the voice of God is itself no straightforward matter. How do we know it's God and not a figment of our imagination, some grandiose delusion? What does God's voice sound like? Three times, Samuel mistakes it for the voice of his master Eli – and it's only because the old man sets him straight that things can proceed. We need help hearing – we need each other – the shared work of spiritual discernment. We rely on each other's capacity to attend with us, to attend to us, to notice what is happening within and around. Sometimes it's a question – have you considered this? Sometimes an observation – you seem to come alive when ..., you keep coming back to With attentive noticings like these, we encourage each other in deeper listening, we companion each other in the way of God.

But then, if you're like earnest little me, you worry – what if I've missed it? What if I haven't picked up the cues, or mis-heard at some fundamental level and my life is stuffed because I am now utterly and irretrievably lost? Here, the very earthy, almost comical story of Samuel's call is deeply reassuring. The patience of God, the gracious persistence of God who speaks over and over again until he finally gets it. When I first sensed that I might be called to ordination, I thought (a) that it was a

very bad idea and (b) that I was probably deluded. But I also thought – if this is for real, it will come back. There is not only one chance, and there is not only one path. If we are even half-listening and open, then (in the fullness of time) we will hear.

Today is my last day at Holy Covenant.

I have talked with many of you as I've been here among you – and I know you are on this journey – of listening, seeking truth in your own life and who you are in God

What I want to say is that doing this journey, realising who we are in God, is critical to discipleship. It is part of our vocation to be human, to become who we are called to be in the economy of God's grace and love. It's how we grow to contribute *our* part to the whole.

Today, our paths diverge, but we are on the same journey. How do we keep going on this way, gradually realising who we are called to be? Let the final word be from the great Australian theologian, Michael Leunig, from his poem 'How to get there'.

How to get there

Go to the end of the path, until you get to the gate.
Go through the gate and head straight out towards the horizon.
Keep going towards the horizon.
Sit down and have a rest every now and again,
but keep on going, just keep on with it.
Keep on going as far as you can.
That's how you get there.

My blessing on you all.