

“WAKING UP SMELLING COFFEE”

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany, January 14, 2018

Text: John 1:43-51

Epiphanies happen all the time. Everybody has them. They are moments when you suddenly realize something that was not apparent before. We talk about the “light bulb going on,” something “dawning” on you, “all of a sudden realizing” something. All the time we are finding out a little more about this or that, but there are times when our understanding leaps forward. Those are epiphanies.

The most important epiphanies have to do with the question of whether we are going to be all right; whether peace and love will carry the day. Christians call this the question of “whether God looks on us with favor.” Other people may insert the name of another god or no god; but they are just as interested in the same question—is all this going to work out: for us, for our family, for humanity?

I suspect that for most of us that is an open question. Things that happen to us or we read about things that alarm us. We are often threatened with harm of various sorts. And sometimes, all of a sudden, the threats seem so great that we are overwhelmed. We conclude that things certainly will not work out. We lose hope. This is an epiphany, but it is a negative one. We feel as though our worst anxieties have been confirmed, and the world—or our part of it—is truly “going to hell in a handbasket.”

On the other hand, there are times when the something wonderful happens, the news of the day is so bright, that the future opens up anew. We receive some sort of sign that things are going to work out after all! We begin to believe again. To have confidence about our fate. This is a bright epiphany. For example, sometimes I hear people say

that their “faith in humanity” has been restored by the action of one caring person.

There is a “dark epiphany” in today’s First Reading. It opens with a cute story of the child Samuel hearing a voice in the night which turns out to be God calling him. But then comes the message he receives from God. And it is a terrifying message. (So terrible, that the editors of the lectionary made verses 11-20 optional, in case we thought our congregations couldn’t handle it! But let’s face the truth.) What Samuel heard from the Lord was a warning about something terrible he was going to do against the house of Eli. So horrible that both ears of anyone who heard of it would tingle! It was time for Eli to wake up and smell the smoke, because his “house” was burning down! It “seemed good to the Lord,” to destroy the house of Eli. The Lord was peeling off a layer of delusion and revealing that God’s holiness would not tolerate the wickedness of Eli’s sons.

On the other hand, there is a “bright epiphany” in today’s Gospel.

Nathanael is the one who has this epiphany. He is devoted to uncovering the truth about the Messiah, the hope of Israel. He sits in the shade of a fig tree either reading the scriptures or discussing his favorite topic. One day his friend Philip comes and tells him “Come with me! We have found the one you are looking for!” Nathanael gets up and goes with Philip. As they are approaching Jesus, Jesus speaks first: “Look! Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit! He is a rigorous truth-seeker and truth-teller!”

Nathanael replies “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus says “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

This causes an epiphany to happen in Nathanael. A bright epiphany. All at once, it is as though all of his efforts to this point to get at the deep secret of where the Messiah might appear, where he would be from, what he might look like, how he would deliver them---all these questions resolve in an appreciation of the person talking to him. This is it! Here he is! He loses control, and says "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

What caused the epiphany? Why did Nathanael all of a sudden believe in Jesus and become his disciple? Wasn't that a bit of an overreaction, or even a non-sequitur?

In order to understand the sequence as an epiphany, I need to explain a little background.

Nathanael and Jesus and Philip and their friends all knew intimately the scriptures we call the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, there is one mention of people sitting under a fig tree. It is in Zechariah, chapter three. It is how God describes a bright future for Israel!

I think Nathanael heard a hidden message in what Jesus said so casually; he used Zechariah 3 to decode it; and he decided to follow Jesus.

I won't read the entire prophecy, Zech. 3:1-10, just excerpts:

Then he showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of the LORD . . . Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes." And to him he said, "See, I have taken your guilt away from you, and I will clothe you with festal apparel." . . . Then the angel of the LORD assured Joshua, saying "Thus says the LORD of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here. Now listen, Joshua, high priest, you and your colleagues who sit before you! For they are

an omen of things to come: I am going to bring my servant the Branch. . . . I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day. On that day, says the LORD of hosts, you shall invite each other to come under your vine and fig tree."

Now, Nathanael did not need to be told that the figure in Zechariah 3 was named "Joshua." "Jesus" is another form of that name.

Then he remembered that the Joshua in Zechariah 3 got clean clothes to replace his filthy clothes; Jesus had just come from being baptized/washed in the Jordan.

Third, the Joshua in Zechariah's prophecy is told by the Lord that he "shall rule my house and have charge of the Lord's courts." He was waiting for that Messiah!

Fourth, the Joshua in the prophecy is told "And I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day." So this is what salvation will look like!

Nathanael put all that together in a flash, and he woke up and smelled coffee! Jesus was the savior.

He did not think "Wow! This guy has superpowers!" He thought "Wow! God is acting to save his people!" He didn't think Jesus was clever, like Sherlock Holmes. He thought the arrival of Jesus meant that God's centuries-old promises were coming true, and everything would be all right.

That is the epiphany that matters. It is not a matter of understanding how things work. It is a matter of understanding the will of God towards his people.

Is it high time that we all wake up like Samuel and Eli and realize the house is burning down?

Or is it time for us to wake up and smell the coffee God is brewing for his friends? To snap out of our doldrums, our negativism, our contempt for others—and realize that God is in Christ reconciling the entire world to himself?

You know which it is. You can get shockingly bad news almost anywhere. But the good news which raises our spirits and gives us new life is available here, in realizing what God is showing us in Christ.

It is time, in Christ, for us to know the peace of God and allow the peace of God and our confidence about God's love to be what drives and directs our lives. Then we can do what Zechariah said we would do: We can invite one another to come and sit under our vine and fig tree and have a little chat about what the love of God can do. It is time for us to celebrate the bright epiphany that is ours in Christ.

Amen.

