

Twelve years ago I was in the Holy Land for the first time for a January Term class organized through the seminary. The trip was inspiring and educational and a blessed distraction for us seniors who were only days away from finding out where in the country we were being assigned for our first calls. We use the term “first call” for the congregations where we begin ordained ministry, but it’s far from the first call we experience. Whether we can point to a specific revelatory moment or years of a quiet, persistent nagging feeling, in the Lutheran ordination process, any internal sense of call is tested against the external validation of pastors, bishops, professors, supervisors, and candidacy, internship, and call committees. So by the last semester of seminary, we were wondering *where* we were being called, not *if* we were being called. God calls all of us to holy living in all aspects of life; in a sense, the question is always *where* or maybe *what* God is calling us to, not *if* God is calling. When we have a hard time discerning that call, we’re not alone; God’s people have always struggled, as far back as biblical times, even when God literally spoke aloud to God’s people.

Today we join Samuel’s story already in progress. His mother Hanna is unable to have children until the priest Eli, mistaking her fervent prayers at the temple for drunkenness, blesses her. She conceives, and when Samuel is old enough, she dedicates him to temple service in thanksgiving to the Lord, leaving him in Eli’s care. Samuel grows up serving as Eli’s assistant, so when he hears his name being called in the night, he assumes it is Eli calling for help. We might expect him to realize he’s not hearing Eli’s familiar voice, but there’s no reason for him to jump to the conclusion that it’s God. We read that *the word of the Lord was rare in those days; and visions were not widespread*. It even takes Eli three times to figure out that the voice Samuel keeps hearing is the voice of the Lord. Eli tells Samuel to answer if he is called again, and Samuel obeys: *Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening*.

The lectionary gives us the option to stop reading right there, and if we did, it would be a lovely, uplifting story about discerning God’s call in our lives. But when we keep reading... Samuel might have wished he had invested in a good pair of earplugs. God calls Samuel to be a prophet and a priest—he will anoint the first two kings of Israel—but he gets that job because Eli’s own sons are corrupt and have been exploiting the people. Samuel is reluctant to tell Eli what he has heard from the Lord. Yet Eli takes the news remarkably well; after all, he knew what his sons had been doing—and he did tell them to stop—but he didn’t do anything about it when they didn’t. Ultimately the message Samuel receives is not personal but communal good

news for God's people; it is unexpected change, announced to an unexpected person, but it's unexpected change for the better.

Fast forward a thousand years and even Jesus' disciples have not all learned to discern God's call or trust the new direction where it leads them. When Jesus begins collecting disciples, he calls Philip himself, and Philip responds immediately. However, it's not Jesus but Philip who first speaks to Nathanael, inviting him to come along. Nathanael is not so easily persuaded: *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?* he asks. I realize things have changed in the last two thousand years, but I've been to Bethsaida; I'm not sure Nathanael had that much cause to be looking down his nose at Nazareth; but like Samuel, he wouldn't have been expecting Philip's news.

Yet in three little words, Philip preaches the best and most effective sermon than any of us could ever preach: *Come and see*. Philip had his own encounter with Christ, but Nathanael hadn't yet. And although Nathanael might have been a little elitist, honestly, it's pretty wise to exercise healthy skepticism when someone claims to have had a revelation from God. So Philip invites Nathanael to see for himself, and when he does, he changes his viewpoint immediately. Nathanael is impressed by what Jesus says about him personally, but just as Samuel's revelation was less about him and more about what God was doing for the whole community, Jesus assures Nathanael that he will see much greater things ahead. This is still just the very beginning of Jesus' ministry: within just a few years, Jesus will have changed the whole world.

Like Samuel, it may take us a while to figure out when God is calling. But we have each other to help us discern God's call. Like Nathanael, we can and should ask questions: maybe we can be a little less snarky than Nathanael was when we ask them, but the heart of his question is the right one: *Can something good come out of this?* Because if it's not for the good of God's people, how can we claim the call is coming from God? And like Philip, when we have experienced the life-changing call of Christ, then we can call others. Philip talks about what he has witnessed, but it's really his invitation to *Come and see* that gets Nathanael out from under his fig tree. When was the last time you invited someone to come and see what this community is all about? We, too, might say that we live in a time when the word of the Lord is rare and visions are not widespread. That's all the more reason for us invite others into the hope of God's life-changing love. The lamp of God has not yet gone out; there's no time like the present for us to reflect its light.