

## 2 Epiphany (Year B)

January 14, 2024

*The Rev. David ("Chip") Robinson*

Well, here we are just two weeks into the New Year and already we could be excused for wondering why we persist in calling it "new." There is a depressing familiarity about the first days of this year, a sense of dismal repetition, an awareness that there is indeed "nothing new under the sun."

Our headlines have been dominated by the same things that dominated the mall of 2023, and it all seems to be very much business as usual, with a tired old world spinning endlessly, one more time.

So we turn to our appointed Scriptures for this morning and we find ourselves in familiar territory. *"Now the boy Samuel was ministering in the temple under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rarely heard..."* In other words this was a time of spiritual famine, a time when people seemed only to reach "God's answering machine," a time when the most evident feature of God was God's absence.

We're told that in this time visions were not widespread. In other words people groped in the dark, and they lacked direction and God didn't seem to be getting through very well. Tellingly, we are told that the priest Eli's sight was dim. Surely in this context his blindness was not just a condition of the retina but is a metaphor for the state of his soul.

These were dark times.

As you read the passage, you sense there is something deeper beneath this simple phrase: it was the very light of God's presence that seemed about to flicker out in Eli's soul, leaving him in a state of utter spiritual abandonment.

What is so depressing as you read this passage is that there seems no way out of this scenario, no way through, no hope of a better tomorrow, for where is "something better" to come from? Where are the resources that might kick-start something genuinely new and different?

There is a weary sense here of a tired old priesthood represented by Eli which has now run its course and has nowhere to go. It's reached a dead end. Likewise Israel is barren and sterile and lifeless and people yearn and long for some new initiative, some new configuration, something unexpected, some surprise that will bring transformation and usher in something different. But nothing. Just more of the same.

Depressing, isn't it? But realistic. There really does seem to be nothing new under the sun – only endless repetition.

Then we turn to our reading from John's Gospel and we can sympathize with Nathaniel's cynical, jaded reaction to Philip's excitement. Philip claims to have found the one foretold in the law and the prophets! But what is Nathaniel's response? "Nazareth? Puh! Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" We all know Nazareth! It's a place for losers and always has been.

I remember a conversation I once had with someone who had traveled to Nazareth as part of an overall trip to the Holy Land. He was excited at the prospect of traveling to the place Jesus lived so much of his life. Alas, it was a disappointment. It was a bland town, a boring place. And, apparently, it was a dull place back in Jesus' day as well.

Maybe we could re-phrase Nathaniel and ask, "can anything *new* come out of Nazareth?", or indeed, for that matter, can anything *new* come out of Jerusalem, or Washington, or the State House in Boston?

But then we return to Samuel.

We return to the silent darkness where the lamp of God glows so dimly and so faintly and if we listen very carefully, what do we hear? In the stillness there is a faint voice to be heard: "*Samuel, Samuel...*" And the voice of the youth replies, "Here I am..."

Of course in the fading, tired order of things Samuel can only interpret what is happening in terms of the old, the familiar. It must be Eli that is calling. And Eli likewise. At first he cannot discern the voice of God in Samuel's story, for, as he saw things, God doesn't speak any more. But it is *not* Eli calling and Samuel is *not* mistaken. It *is* the voice of God, gentle but firm, easily mistaken, yet persistent. And so God enters into that dark, empty place and suddenly something new is stirring. God is there, and at work.

And so too with Nazareth.

What we need to know about Nazareth is that it was more than just a dull and bland place. It was also a *dark* place. Around the time of Jesus there were a number of rebellions and uprisings against the Roman occupiers in the area where Jesus lived. Such rebellions were put down ruthlessly. The Romans did not meet insurrection with half measures.

The Roman response to uprisings was swift, and so we can assume that Nazareth was not as much a boring place as a scarred place. A place of tears – and of painful memories. In some ways, I picture it not unlike a place I visited 15 years ago, Ondjiva,

Angola, a West African town that six of us from New Hampshire visited on a mission trip. The tour books said “there’s nothing there to see.” And, sure enough, by surface standards, that was true. You’d surely never call Ondjiva a “tourist spot.” Years of war had made it a scarred place – as well as, I’m sure, a boring one. (Though in our week there, I can assure you, we never became bored.) And yet, like when Jesus was growing up, it had become something of a dynamic place if you looked beneath the surface. Traumatic events had formed a resilient people there – and a people hungry for God to act. It is out of a place like this that suddenly Jesus emerges. In Nazareth Jesus is nurtured. Here he grows and is taught and learns about God. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Yes, something, *someone* does.

So maybe there is something new under the sun after all.

History has been memorably described as “just one thing after another” but perhaps that is wrong. The voice of God is heard in a time of God’s seeming absence. Something new *does* come out of scarred and bland places like Nazareth. But the task is to discern it. Like Samuel, like Eli, we can all too easily fail to recognize it. Like Nathaniel, our prejudices and presumptions can cloud our eyes so that we are oblivious to it.

Last Sunday, while we were celebrating the Epiphany, and its emphasis on the visit from the Magi, churches in other places heard the story of the Baptism of Christ. The readings for that celebration, had we chosen to use them, would have included Mark’s account of Jesus’ baptism in the river Jordan. There is a very striking phrase in the description of what happened there. We are told that as Jesus emerged from the water John “saw heaven being torn open.” Then the Spirit descended on Jesus and a voice came from heaven, declaring Jesus to be the beloved of God. That’s dramatic, eye-catching stuff!

The skies splitting apart – this is an epiphany, a manifesting of who Jesus is. Here something new is breaking in from above, tearing open the skies, invading the world.

But that is not how it usually happens. More often, rather than breaking in from above, God *emerges* without fanfare from below with offers of new life and new hope – a voice in the night, a stranger from Nazareth.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Yes, to our surprise, *Jesus* does. Can something new emerge from old, tired, scarred places? Yes, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, it does. And in dark places today, places like Nazareth, God is at work.

In Nazareth itself, as well as in Gaza and the West Bank, in a land where Palestinians face the horrors of war and all kinds of oppression and humiliation, people

are caring for one another, sharing with one another, supporting one another, even now with that region of the world is suffering devastation beyond our imagining. And in other places like Angola or, for that matter, Nigeria or Sudan, there can be found stories of heroism and love and self-sacrifice. In such places God can be found and God's voice heard, if only in whispers.

And in the church too –this church.

Here we are in our rampantly secular world where we are so familiar with the reality of church decline and sometimes it can feel a bit like Samuel's day. It can feel sometimes as if the word of the Lord is rarely heard and there doesn't seem to be much outpouring of vision. And to many Nazareth is a good metaphor for the Church – a dull place, a bland place: can anything good, anything new come from this Nazareth?

Well, yes, it can and it does.

For it is from such unpromising places and situations that we will indeed "see heaven open and God's angels ascending and descending." If only our eyes and ears – like the skies – are open.

We are coming into a year in which we *have to* have our eyes and our ears open for the hopeful and good things God is doing. If we are going to move forward into the new reality God is setting before us, we are going to

- have to let go of our fears,
- have to let go of our preconceived notions,
- have to...just let go...and let God move us to where God is taking us.

This is not going to be easy. But, as a believer in the scriptures we have just heard,

- I have to stand with Nathaniel,
- I have to stand with Samuel,
- I have to stand with Philip,
- I have to stand with Andrew and Peter.

And be open to be invitation, "Come and see!"

"Do you believe because I told you?" Jesus asks. "Hang on! Because soon, you will see greater things than these." If we're open to it, we will. And it *won't* be the same old, same old, I promise you. Amen.