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Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY

Epiphany 2/Year B/I Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; I Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

“Knowing and Being Known”

In the name of God—Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

Throughout our lives and throughout our church year, we often think about how God is present with us, but during the season of Epiphany, we focus more directly on manifestations and revelations of that presence—those times of epiphany when the veil is lifted and we are gifted with a greater certainty that we are not alone—that we have a God who loves and cares deeply—who is intimately involved in our lives and in all of creation—who is nudging us to be in relationship with holy mystery at all times—times of greatest joy as well as times of deepest distress and despair.

The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann tells the story of how he came to know God’s presence and to discover his Christian faith in the darkest and most hopeless of circumstances. Moltmann was born in Hamburg, Germany in 1926. At the time he would have been beginning university studies, he was instead drafted into the German Air Force in World War II. He was taken prisoner by the British in 1945—at age 19—and was in various prisoner-of-war camps in Belgium, Scotland, and England for over three years. Early on in that imprisonment, Germany collapsed and the German people were left to face the horror of the crimes that the Hitler regime had committed in Germany’s name. The shame that many of them felt was palpable. In prison Moltmann saw men around him, in the most dire of conditions, giving up hope and physically and spiritually starving to death. He speaks of his experience in these words: “The same thing

almost happened to me. What kept me from it was a rebirth to new life thanks to a hope for which there was no evidence at all. It was not that I experienced any sudden conversion. What I felt all at once was the death of all the mainstays that had sustained my life up to then. It was only slowly that something different began to build up in their stead. At home (in Germany), Christianity was only a matter of form. One came across it once a year at Christmas time, as something rather remote. In the prison camps where I was, I only met it in very human—all too human—form. It was nothing very overwhelming. And yet the experience of misery and forsakenness and daily humiliation gradually built up into an experience of God.

“It was the experience of God’s presence in the dark night of the soul...A well-meaning Army chaplain had given me a New Testament. I thought it was out of place. I would rather have had something to eat. But then I became fascinated by the Psalms... (they) gave me words for my own suffering. They opened my eyes to the God who is with those ‘that are of a broken heart’. (God) was present even behind the barbed wire—no, most of all behind the barbed wire. But whenever in my despair I wanted to lay firm hold on this experience, it eluded me again, and there I was with empty hands once more. All that was left was an inward drive, a longing which provided the impetus to hope. How often I walked round and round in circles at night in front of the barbed wire fence. My first thoughts were always about the free world outside, from which I was cut off; but I always ended up thinking about a centre to the circle in the middle of the camp—a little hill, with a hut on it which served as a chapel. It seemed to me like a circle surrounding the mystery of God, which was drawing me towards it...This experience of not sinking into the abyss but of being held up from afar was the beginning of a clear hope, without which it is impossible to live at all” (Experiences of God, 7-8).

In Epiphany, we might ask ourselves how we, too, have experienced a certain presence of God. How have we known that God is “with us”—that God is Immanuel for us?

In the readings for last Sunday, God was being noisy—making the reality of God known in ways that cannot be missed—tearing open the heavens and speaking the words, “You are my beloved; in you I am well-pleased”—filling Christians with the Holy Spirit and giving them the ability to speak in tongues and to prophesy. In today’s readings, the revelation is more personal and intimate. Our readings are about recognizing God through knowing God and being known by God in private and deeply inner ways.

Our lesson from I Samuel is one of the most well-known and well-loved stories in Hebrew scripture. The young boy Samuel is given to God at his birth by his mother Hannah and is later literally put into the hands of Eli to be trained for serving God in the temple. The second sentence of our reading tells us that people aren’t hearing God say much at this particular time. “The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” Sounds like today perhaps! Sounds oddly contemporary. Any given day we might look at the circumstances of the world and say, “We must not be hearing much from God these days.” But, one young boy in the quiet of the temple offers his listening ear to God, and he hears a lot. He hears a message that God says will make ears “tingle.” We all know what it’s like to have our ears tingle—when we hear the message we most dread hearing. Our ears tingle when we are afraid—when a rush of adrenalin courses through our veins—when we go on high alert.

Listening attentively for God’s words is a difficult thing to do. Mostly we don’t listen because we don’t really expect to hear anything. Or maybe it is because we think God will ask too much. What we hear may be a request, or even demand, to do something we would prefer

not to do—to say something we would prefer not to say—to confront a situation that would be easier not to confront—to seek reconciliation rather than revenge. Samuel doesn't want to tell Eli what God has said to him—it's not good news for Eli—but Samuel doesn't have a choice. God has made him the bearer of the message, and Samuel knows that his life has been dedicated to God irrevocably. He knows, even as a child, that that is who he is. His life is to be that of a trustworthy prophet who has to listen and has to tell the truth. That's what true prophets do.

Psalm 139, too, is one of our most-beloved passages of scripture. The Psalmist is expressing the depth of God's involvement in our lives and the completeness of God's knowledge of who we are. God knows our actions, our thoughts, our words—our sleeping and our waking. God even knows us before we are born. God is so present with us that “(God) presses upon us behind and before and (leans against us and touches us). Such knowledge is too wonderful for (us).” It is mind-boggling and beyond understanding. To know that we are known and loved gives us at least a brief experience of what we might call grace-filled vulnerability—an openness to a God who is worthy of our complete trust. When we get a glimpse of that knowledge, we also get a glimpse of who God is and who we are—made in God's image—and that glimpse is life-changing. We are not who we thought we were. And, when we make that shift, we know that there is no more room for fear, for we are held in the grasp of a trustworthy God who will not let us go. We cannot flee from God's presence or from God's grasp.

Paul writes to the Corinthians explaining to them the closeness of their relationship to God and what that implies in how they are to live their lives. He would surely send us that same message. We are not our own. We belong to God. We are united to God in one spirit. But it's more than about spirit. It's physical. Our bodies are temples of God—containers or vessels of

God. Everything about us is sacred—including our physicality. That makes a huge difference in what we do to and with ourselves and our bodies. What is acceptable for us changes. What we do to ourselves we are doing to God.

And, finally, our gospel for today—this rather comical, personal interaction between Jesus and Philip and Nathanael. Philip invites his friend to meet the one he knows to be the Messiah, and Nathanael responds, “Yea, right. Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael sounds highly skeptical. That’s like saying, “Can anything good come from the other side of the tracks? Only bumpkins come from Nazareth.” But it doesn’t take much for Nathanael to change his mind—to have an epiphany. And, it happens when he realizes that Jesus knows who he is. All Jesus has to say to him is, “I know you. I saw you from a distance, and I know who you are. You can’t hide from me.” When Nathanael knows that Jesus knows him, then Nathanael also knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus is the Messiah. And Jesus says, “I will show you even more.”

Knowing that God knows us is a powerful experience. Almost every Sunday we hear the acknowledgement of that power when we begin our services with the Collect for Purity. “Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid.” As we continue through this season of Epiphany, may we be drawn into deeper intimacy with God and experience the freedom of knowing and being known. Amen.