

Wesley United Methodist Church

Rev. Beverly E Stenmark

Bread, Bath & Beyond

January 14, 2018

Title: Beyond Belief

Scripture: I Samuel 3:1-10

John 1:43-51

John 6:42

When you are trying to make an important decision, have you ever wished that God would use a neon light or something equally as obvious to get your attention and give you an answer? Unfortunately for many or most of us, that doesn't seem to be the way God works. Yes, there certainly are stories in the Bible of God getting someone's attention in dramatic ways, but they don't seem to be the norm.

The story of Paul on the Road to Damascus comes to mind. Paul was persecuting followers of Jesus, and was on his way to Damascus to have some of the followers of the "The Way" arrested. A bright light from heaven suddenly flashed around him and as he fell to the ground he heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9) I think it is safe to say that God had his attention. But despite the drama of this situation, it isn't really the norm in the Bible or in many, or most, of our lives.

Today, we are thinking about the beliefs and assumptions that we make about where and how God will show up and how those beliefs or assumptions can blind us or open us to God's presence in our lives.

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" That was the question that Nathanael asked when Philip came to him and told him that he had found the "one Moses wrote about in the Law and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." (John 1:45) The Jews had long been looking for, hoping for, the messiah. If true, this

would have been great news, but Nathanael lefts his prejudice, his assumptions immediately get in the way. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” People today do not agree about what Nazareth was like in Biblical times. Some believe that it was a very small town of no importance at all. Others believe that it was a town despised by the Jews because it was the home of one of the Roman Military posts. Either way, Nathanael, who came from nearby Cana, immediately assumed that nothing good could come out of Nazareth, certainly not anything that involved God, and definitely not the long-awaited Messiah.

Samuel was a young boy whose mother Hannah had promised that if God would break her barrenness and give her a child, she would dedicate that child to God. Samuel, whose name means “God has heard”, was living in the temple and working with Eli the priest in fulfillment of his mother’s promise. Eli by this time was an old man who was nearly blind. It was a time of great corruption that included even Eli’s sons. According to the Biblical passage, there was little reason for anyone to believe that God was active at that time so when Samuel heard a voice calling him in the middle of the night, naturally he believed that it was Eli calling to him.

Three times, the voice called to Samuel and three times he went immediately to Eli, the priest, whose name means “my god”, to see what the old man needed. Finally, Eli’s blindness to God was punctured and he realized that it must be God calling to Samuel. When God called a fourth time, Samuel did as Eli had instructed him and responded, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Samuel and Nathanael both needed help to get beyond what they believed and to be open to God acting in their lives. Samuel needed Eli, who even though he had not paid attention to God for a long time, realized

that night what was happening and was able to tell Samuel what to do and how to respond. Nathanael needed Philip. Philip didn't try to argue with Nathanael. He didn't tell Nathanael that he was being prejudiced or ridiculous. Philip didn't try to persuade Nathanael that he was wrong. Philip simply invited Nathanael to "come and see".

Samuel and Nathanael when confronted by God's presence went beyond the beliefs and assumptions that initially blinded them to God's actions, and they responded to God. Jews, Muslims, and Christians all recognize Samuel as a prophet. He was the last judge of Israel, anointed both Saul and David as king and served as an advisor to both of them. Nathanael was recognized by Jesus as a man of integrity, a man in "whom there is no deceit." Nathanael became one of Jesus' twelve original disciples and was one of the first to declare that Jesus was the "Son of God".

Like Samuel and Nathanael, we may let what we believe get in the way of seeing God in action. We may think that because we have not had any earth shattering encounter with God that God is not aware of us or has not been working in our lives. In Wesleyan tradition, we believe that God has been working in all our lives from the very beginning – long before we knew anything about God. In theological terms, we call this Prevenient Grace – grace that comes before we recognize God at work, even before we know anything about God.

We may have needed people like Eli and Philip to challenge our assumptions; to invite us to "come and see", and to respond, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." At times in our lives, we may be Eli or Philip for someone else.

The songs that we have sung today – or will sing at the end – are all songs that remind us of how God works in our lives. They may challenge our beliefs and assumptions so that we can move beyond them to open our eyes to see the holy in unexpected places and people. In our first song, “You are mine” we sang that God comes to us at all times, with the message to not be afraid, because “I am with you. I love you and you are mine.”

We just sang a song that was probably new to most of you – despite the fact that I selected it, I had heard it probably only once before. But, it speaks to God’s presence in our lives and challenges the belief that we need to be in a special place or doing special things to see God or be part of God’s plan. It reminded us that we can see God – or art – not only in majestic places like palaces and museums but also in the simple gifts that children make. It reminds us not to miss the simple things like the response to someone in tears. Most importantly it reminds us that God trusts to us the miracle of life. If we believe that God is present in every part of life, it makes a difference in how we see life and what happens.

I believe that all that we say and do comes out of our core beliefs. In most cases, we probably don’t stop to think about it – to pay attention to what it is we believe, but what we really believe most definitely affects how we act and how we respond to the big questions of life.

I have a colleague who is preaching today about suffering and he asked people on Facebook to share some of their stories and where they saw God in their experiences. Our responses to suffering, either our own or someone else’s, tell us something important about what we believe.

Most of the people who responded to my friend talked about how during the most difficult times they were surrounded by people who

became the hands and feet of Christ – walking with them. This, for me, is an example of incarnational love. I believe that God is present with us through the expressions of love, concern, and support of our friends. I believe that it is their belief that our life is important that makes them respond in this way. If they didn't believe our life was important they would not respond with love, concern, and support. In many cases it reflects the belief that we are all loved by God.

Many of them talked about the long nights and times when they were alone and when they would go to God in prayer; knowing that God heard them, that they were not alone, that God would give them the strength to face the next day and to do what needed to be done.

This is very different from another belief that I sometimes hear, that God is responsible for everything that happens. When someone they love becomes ill or dies, they may become very angry with God, rejecting a God who they believe would take the life of a good person. I can understand this pain and anger; but I grieve at the belief that goes with it. It is not a belief that I find comforting. I believe that God grieves with us when someone becomes ill. I believe that God is present with us in the pain – as the psalmist says “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me.” I believe that when someone dies it is not because God takes someone, but rather that God gently receives that person back into God's loving arms.

Another common response to suffering is that God has nothing to do with it, but that it is the fault of the person who is suffering. Although there are cases in which the decisions and actions of our lives may make us more susceptible to certain illnesses, I do not believe that suffering is a punishment for anything we have done. And even when the suffering is

brought about by something over which we had control, I believe that even then, God does not ever desert us or leave us to face it alone.

If we listen carefully, we can hear all of these beliefs and more expressed clearly or sometimes indirectly in the voices of debate around health care, tax reform, immigration, education, foreign aid, social welfare programs, employment, environment, and almost any other topic you can name. When we listen carefully, rather than arguing, we can learn a lot about what another person really believes – the beliefs that underlie their actions and words.

As I was preparing this sermon, the news was full of people weighing in on a comment that is claimed to have come from a meeting at the White House. To me the comment, sounded a lot like Nathanael's question, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Whether it really was said or not, it is a reminder to us to pay attention to the things we believe, the assumptions we make about people who are different than us in some way. The answer that Nathanael learned is that, "Yes, something very good can come out of Nazareth!" Something very good can come out of any place or any person that God has created – and yes, something very good can come out of us, too! We need to pay attention to what we believe, what we assume, and realize that God may be calling us to go beyond our beliefs and assumptions about where God is working.

One of the commentators I read this week wrote that, "Samuel was called by God in a time of spiritual desolation, religious corruption, personal immorality, political danger and social upheaval." Then he asked, "Sound familiar?"ⁱ The author was not writing this week, but more than 15 years ago. I have read other commentators making similar observations and writing 30, 50, or more years ago. It seems that we often find ourselves

living in difficult times; times when we may have difficulty being open to God's actions around us. He went on to say that in a time of crisis, God raised up Samuel who, himself was a sign that God was still present with the people.

How do we today know when God is speaking to us? How can we discern the voice of God from among the clamor of voices demanding our attention?

I think it begins with Samuel's response, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." It includes having people like Eli and Philip in our lives who will help us challenge our beliefs and assumptions and "come and see", be open to a new idea that God may be planting in our hearts or minds, or in the heart or mind of someone else who will invite us to come and see and be open.

Let us pray:

O Holy One, teach us to recognize your presence in settings and among people that surprise us. Help us to remove the blinders of prejudice. Help us to yearn to see the world as you do and to embrace life as you do – with love and compassion. Amen.ⁱⁱ

ⁱWingeier, Douglas E, editor Keeping Holy Time – Year B, Abingdon Press, 2002, p.65

ⁱⁱ Adapted from Upper Room Disciplines 2018, p.27