

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

To Know and Be Known

John 1

January 14, 2023

Last week we began the year in worship by saying an Epiphany prayer of blessing over the church house. Today, we've said a prayer of blessing over one of our babies. That's quite a beautiful way to begin the year, prayers for God's goodness, God's hand on a place and a person, and prayers that each of us may be a blessing to both the place and the people. They do meet because the place is where the person knows and is known. This is at the heart of Christian spirituality—to know and be known, by God and by others. Ideally, that's what happens in church and at the church, and it is the subject of the readings this morning.

Church becomes a spiritual home as this happens in and to us. Home is the place of seeing and being seen, of knowing and being known. Buried deep in Chronicles is a testimony to the whole world as a place where God knows and desires to be known, where God searches and sees, "The eyes of the Lord go to and fro throughout the whole earth to strengthen those whose heart is completely his."

God sees and God knows a person even when they feel lost and buried in a terrible situation. Samuel was seen and known and found in such a situation. He was a good boy. Dutiful, respectful. It was said of him, "Samuel was ministering to the Lord." From a young age, he had been dedicated to the Lord's service by his mother Hannah. And by all accounts, he did so with a pure heart. He was a good boy... in a gross situation. The priest who Samuel served under was a man named Eli. Eli was getting to be old. It was said of him, "his eyesight had begun to grow dim" which is a euphemism for someone who is growing old but in scripture is also a metaphor for a person's fading faith and spirit. His faith had begun to grow dim. You don't need a metaphor to see the results. Eli's ministry as the priest of God had hardened to the self-appointed task of policing the prayers of others. In Chapter 1, he sees a young woman who has the audacity to pray heartfelt prayers of suffering and heartbreak. Eli's response, as the priest of God is, "Are you drunk? What are you doing praying like that?" He couldn't recognize true prayer when he saw it.

In Chapter 2, we see the fig doesn't fall far from the tree. His sons, who were supposed to carry on the ministry in the temple are described as 'worthless men'. They got fat off the sacrifices of the people; they slept with female pilgrims. They were the worst of any religious institution: cynical, self-serving, philandering. And Eli let it happen. Meanwhile, young Samuel, dedicated to the Lord, is there with them, supposedly learning from them, and ministering to the Lord. It's by God's grace and his character that it could be said, that despite everything around him, despite the malformation he received, despite it all, Samuel grew and grew up well.

You may feel totally invisible to God's grace, but God sees, and God knows. This is an extraordinary claim: that the God of the universe knows and cares for each person intimately. It is to say: that your prayers are not in vain. How many people who grow up in tragic situations, still grow to be kindhearted people? They are people of grace, those who carry deep wounds

from life as it shouldn't have been but was. This is the grace of God that we are certainly shaped by the circumstances of our childhood and our formation, but we are not shackled to them.

One might remember Harry Potter in the cupboard under the Dursley stairs, and we might remember so many real-life situations that are perhaps not as dramatic but just as difficult. Parker Palmer describes his childhood as a long experience of duplicity. Successful in school, chosen by his classmates as president of his class, thought to be outgoing and self-assured, but in truth, behind the veil, crippled with anxiety. "After school," he writes, "I did not hang out with friends. I hid out in my bedroom... my room was a monastic cell where I could be the self with whom I felt most at home—so unlike the extrovert I played with such anxiety at school (Hidden Wholeness, 14)". Palmer survived by having a safe space to be and discover his true self.

I don't know how Samuel's spirit survived his situation living with Eli and his worthless sons, but he did, possibly by hiding as much as possible. But God found him. One night, God called to Samuel. Samuel kept waking up Eli, "Yes, you called me." Eli would say, "I didn't call you, go back to bed." Neither he, nor the priest Eli, at first even recognized it was God's voice, but eventually, Samuel answered, under Eli's instruction and to his credit, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening."

God found him, but in one way, that's easy or it should have been. He was ministering to the Lord, growing up in the temple. The temple is where God is supposed to be. When you come to the temple or the church, it's where you're supposed to be able to be found. God sees and God knows those in God's house. We should expect that, but we also see God's house is not delaminated by walls. God's eye goes through the whole earth.

As we see in our Gospel reading, God's house is pretty big and not limited by any walls. When Jesus calls his disciples they aren't particularly religious young people flocking to the temple for more Bible study; they are fishermen and tax collectors and hotheads. They are women in morally compromised relationships, some of which they did not choose, and to be clear, it's not their moral compromise in those situations. They are people tossed out for sickness and physical disability from the communities of which they are a part. They're the others. In Jesus, they are seen, known, and found.

One day Nathanael, just sitting under a fig tree as if there's nothing better to do, is found. His friend Philip comes to him like he's been shot out of a canon, "We've found him—the one Moses and the prophets spoke about. Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth. Apparently, a Messiah arising from Nazareth was a strange idea. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Nathanael asked. I don't know what he had against Nazareth, but it was a prickly objection he'd have to overcome as he went to see what the fuss was about.

Jesus sees him coming toward him and declares, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Kind of a strange thing to say, but it means something like: here's someone who tells it like it is, someone who means what he says and says what he means, here's someone who calls it like he sees it, who is the same person inside and out. I think Jesus saw something of himself

in Nathanael. Even before meeting him, Jesus seems to have seen something and know something deep about the man's character that Jesus immediately and instinctively responds to.

How did Jesus know so much about him? Nathanael wanted to know. Where did you get to know me? Or another way, "Have we met?" It's a little unnerving for someone to know you in an intimate way and to say something true about you. No matter how long you've known them. The psalmist says deep calls to deep. Have you ever had someone who could see right through you?

The truth is most of us most of the time don't even know ourselves. On the one hand, we have this desperate desire to really be known and be understood by others. And it's frustrating when others don't understand us, don't get us.

On the other hand, most of us are still early in the process of knowing who we actually are. That's frustrating, too. How can we? The world around us holds that we are little more than raw material fated by the circumstances that we are born into. In the world's telling, we grow to be a teeming mass of consumer needs met conveniently by product placement, dictated by data analysis of who they know you are. You are your sociological data, metabolized into consumption or votes. Today's era of big data, which knows you better than you know yourself, is merely the development of the age-old idea to which Nathanael was suspect as someone who thinks he knows what everyone from Nazareth is like. Most of us aren't worried about whether something good can come from Nazareth. Most of us would say, "Can anything good come from me?"

He may be a man who tells it like it is, but even that man can learn how it is, is different than he saw it. He thought he understood everything there was to know about Nazareth—nothing good comes from there. Until it does. He who was seen, now sees. He who was known, now knows. Nathanael's abrupt declaration of faith is the utterance of someone who sees with the gift of a penetrating vision that what's before him, the one before him, is the Messiah.

In these two people, Samuel and Nathanael, we have before us two poles of God's seeing and knowing: one a person in a bad situation whose heart is pure, and God's grace redeems. The other, a person who is just kind of a person not really close to God, who thinks he has some of life figured out on his own, a person whom God's truth transforms. The eyes of the Lord go throughout the earth.

There is no limit to what God sees and how God sees and how God finds us and the extent to which God knows us. This might be scary news--we see the call that it put on Samuel was to speak some hard truth and eventually to overturn everything. The call placed on Nathanael's lift to follow Jesus, which would lead to his own martyrdom. When God sees, finds, and knows us, it leads us to where God desires to lead us. And sometimes, that's hard. There is no limit to the intimate knowledge of God and of God's knowledge of us. This is the mystery to which Psalm 139 bears witness:

You search me and you know me.

The God of the Universe knows each of us personally and intimately.

I think to put it in even stronger terms, the God of the Universe cares enough to know each of us personally and intimately. This is quite a claim. We're living in a moment technology through the Webb telescope is giving us images of far reaches of the universe, the scale of which stretches even the most robust of human imagination. The sheer expanse of space put before us in new images weekly, the absurd number of galaxies and stars we are asked to somehow compute--it's beyond comprehension. It's only in the realm of wonder and awe.

For all of this, the Creator God knows you—knows the you that you don't even know---knows the you that you're not sure you wish God knew---knows the you that no one else knows—knows the you that you were and are and are becoming. This intimate knowledge of the Divine of you. God knows your troubles and the challenges you've faced and face. God knows the troubles you've caused yourself and others; and God knows that which you never asked for—those troubles that have visited you—that have come to your body, your relationships, your mind, your home. God sees, and God knows. God knows where your heart is tender. God knows where your heart is hard.

You search me and know me. You know when I sit and when I rise.

You know my thoughts before I utter them. You know all my ways.

The psalmist believes God knows us from top to bottom from beginning to end; this knowledge of God is endlessly expansive: from my birth to my death, all the days of my life.

Where can I go from your presence? From the depths to the heights. From the heavens to the place of death, to the uttermost part of the sea, even there, your hand shall lead me, your right hand shall hold me. Even darkness, the deepest darkness is not dark to you. You still see. You still find me there.

This is quite a confession, and it may be daunting, but it is ultimately good news. To be known and cared for in this way is the foundation of our faith. This is our confession and our prayer today. All the world is the house of God. Wherever you are, whoever you are, you are already home where you are seen, known, found, and loved.

The allure of the Christian story—the incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit, is that it opens you to a depth of your own soul you may never even know you possessed. This move of death and rebirth is your story, and in this story, you are known better than you know yourself. There's intimacy with your creator made possible. Entering this intimacy with faith and trust of course is the risk we take in any relationship of any meaning. We risk being known. This is the risk and the grace of life with Jesus. May you come to it with open eyes, open heart, and open hope for all you are and all God is making you to be.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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