

EPIPHANY II, January 18, 2015
Year B: I Sm 3:1-10, John 1:43-51

Holy Comforter, Richmond
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This has not been a good couple of weeks regarding those who think they've heard the voice of God. Eleven days ago came the horrible shootings in France in the name of Allah, with further threats and incidents ever since. Then last week a guy named Michael Robert Hoyt who thought he was Jesus Christ was arrested for threatening to poison or shoot John Boehner because he decided the Speaker of the House of Representatives was both out to get him *and* responsible for ebola. They're all giving the voice of God a pretty bad name.

Yet today we hear of two experiences of God. Three people encounter the living Lord and find their lives transformed because of it. The young boy Samuel served the old priest Eli in the temple and heard someone calling. Thinking it was Eli, Samuel responded once, then again. By the third time Eli realized it was God speaking, and told the boy what to do. Then we heard of Jesus calling Philip, then of Philip bringing the very skeptical Nathaniel to Jesus. They have a conversation that makes Nathaniel a believer.

Two stories of God addressing mortals. Two of so many more: of Moses perceiving God in the burning bush; of Isaiah envisioning God in the heavenly throne room; of Joseph and Mary learning of Jesus, him by means of a dream and her via an angel; of Paul (or Saul as he was then) being knocked off his high horse as if by a 2 by 4. The Bible recounts one story after another of God encountering human beings in ways that are as different as the personalities he approaches.

And how many of us also listen for what God might be saying? All of us should, for if Jesus invites us to follow him, then as his followers, we have the duty of paying attention to what he says and where he leads.

But *how*? That's the first question. One reason I come to church is somehow to connect with the divine. Hilary is on a retreat, always a chance to sense the closeness of God. Prayer serves that purpose too. Many find guidance in reading the Bible.

These are fairly traditional, fairly standard, fairly *churchy* ways of hearing God. And in the Bible, God never uses any of them. As in the Bible, God's encounters with you and me are as different as we are. I couldn't possibly list the various ways there could be.

We can, though, come up with some guidance, some principles of listening to voices.

It starts by being *open* to God. Let's face it, both Samuel and Nathaniel had to be made aware of what was going on. But they presumed, even sought, the possibility of encountering the

Lord. Samuel, after all, was actually ministering to the Lord already; and Philip wouldn't have come to Nathaniel if Nathaniel was likely to spurn him. Being open comes first.

But, sometimes we need help. Samuel and Nathaniel did. Some guide, mentor, wise or Godly person can assist in getting us to listen or look, in order to hear or see. Sometimes, frankly, we need someone to point out the obvious.

Let's say you hear something: How can you know that it's God who speaks? After all, those terrorists and David Robert Hoyt were pretty clear that it was, and most everyone else are pretty clear that it wasn't. There are, in fact, ways of testing.

First, is what you hear consistent with God? Does it conform not only to what we read in the Scriptures, but also to what we know of Jesus? Lots of passages speak of smiting the ungodly, but there's not only the fifth commandment, but even more, the example of our Lord.

Second, how is what you hear confirmed? What do others say, others whom you trust?

For some years I've been studying the faith of Robert E. Lee, that guy on the horse down the road. After the war, he'd been asked to head up this small devastated school in Lexington. He was pondering that, and what he was supposed to do, now that he'd been so totally defeated. So he got on Traveller and rode over to a friend, who happened to be a priest. The priest tried to steer him toward some grander school, but, helped by that conversation, Lee decided that it was God who was calling him to Washington College. And the rest is history.

Third, see what happens. If Jesus hadn't been born, then Joseph would have chalked up that incredible dream to something bad he ate the night before. But the dream came true. And sometimes as we watch events unfold, the circumstances themselves confirm or correct what we believe that God is guiding.

Do you seek the will of God? Then be alert. Listen. But if you hear something, for God's sake test that out. See how it conforms with what else you know of God, especially in Jesus our Lord. Talk with others. Watch what happens.

But don't quit there. Proceed. Act accordingly. For who knows? You too may see the heavens opened.