

## Knowing and Being Known

A sermon for Epiphany 2b - January 17, 2021

St. Andrew Lutheran Church - Franklin, Tennessee

1 Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139; John 1:43-51 - Julian Gordy

Just a couple of days into my walk across Spain in 2002, I came into a tiny farming village one early afternoon. I had been alone all morning and had been thinking about how far from home I was, how foreign everything was, how cut off I was from everything familiar. I was wondering, to tell the truth, that, if something happened to me, if I were kidnaped, say, or fell in a hole, no one would miss me for days. I was a stranger in a strange land, surrounded by people I didn't know and who didn't know me.

Like most of these little Spanish villages, there was a fountain in the middle of the town where I stopped to fill my water bottle. That's when from behind me I heard a voice with a strong Irish accent said, "Julian? From Ocean Springs, USA?" I nearly pitched forward into the fountain! I turned around to see a couple of young people standing there, smiles on their faces, hands outstretched.

I must have *looked* as confused as I was, standing there in a little village square in Spain, trying to be polite to strangers who seemed to know me. Seeing my confusion, one of them said, "Phyllis and Misty told us to look out for you."

Of course! Phyllis and Misty, who were also from Ocean Springs, had started the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela a few days before I had, and, it turned out, were only a day ahead. The young Irish couple was taking a day off in the village and the Phyllis and Misty had told them to be on the lookout for me. Evidently their description was pretty good. (I've wondered since then exactly what it was: aging guy with -at that time, mostly grey beard and matching grey backpack, looking slightly lost?)

It's strange to be known by someone you don't know, to hear a strange voice call your name in a place where you think you are nameless.

Something like that happened to the boy Samuel. You remember his story. His mother Hannah had been childless for years and wanted a child more than anything else. Every year she went to the temple to pray for a child. She promised God that if a child came, she would give him to the service of God in the temple.

When Samuel was finally born and, the text says, "could eat solid food," Hannah kept her promise. She took her son to the temple at Shiloh where he grew up in the care of Eli, the priest. Eli taught Samuel the ways of the temple, taught him about the Lord, trained him so that he would one day become a priest himself.

But I hope you noticed a peculiarity in the text. In the first verse, "Now the boy Samuel was *ministering to the Lord* under Eli." But then in verse seven, "Now Samuel *did not yet know the Lord*." Samuel had spent his youth working in the Lord's temple, but he did not yet *know* the Lord.

No matter. God knew Samuel. And, here's where today's first reading begins: One night God called to the boy while he slept in the temple. Eventually Eli figures out what is going on and instructs Samuel to answer, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Samuel did this, and that is how he came to know the God who had known him all along, and who had called him by name.

The writer of Psalm 139 reminds us that we are all known intimately by God, even if we don't know God. There is no more powerful or beautiful poetry in the bible than here. "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You

know when I sit down and when I get up..... Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.” That’s how well God knows each one of us. Intimately. Inescapably. Completely.

God knows us even before we are born, knows us better than we know ourselves.

And no matter how distracted we are by life and its troubles or its glitter, no matter how inattentive to the presence of God we are, we are never so busy, so distracted, so spiritually dead that God is not with us. We may forget God, but God never forgets us, never for a second leaves us. No matter where we go or what we do or how much we have forgotten our Creator, God remains closer to us than we are to ourselves.

The middle part of Psalm 139 was not part of the appointed psalmody for today. That’s too bad. It makes the point well:

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,”  
even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day.....

God is inescapable.

That might be a bit disconcerting, like having a complete stranger call your name one afternoon in a village square in a foreign country. But think about

it. Since God not only knows you, but also loves you, is anything more comforting? No matter where you may have wondered off, no matter for how long you may have forgotten God, no matter how much you have come to doubt it, God is still with you, still knows your heart, still calls you by name.

In our gospel reading, Jesus knew Nathaniel before Nathaniel had ever met him. Just so the one who created you knows all about you, and, more important, loves you, sticks with you no matter what.

As we continue to find ourselves separated from one another and cut off from those we love, as our country continues to grapple with division and violence, as the world seems to face one insurmountable challenge after another, it should bring us some comfort that our troubles are not unknown to the God who made formed us, gave us life, and loves us.

Even when the word of the Lord is rare, and visions are not widespread, God is with us and gives us cause for hope.

By the time I reached the end of my Spanish pilgrimage, I wasn't surprised any longer when I heard my name called out of the blue by people I did not know. Word travels up and down the camino and it is not unusual to find out you are known by people you have not yet met. You come to realize that you are no longer a stranger in a strange land, but are a fellow pilgrim with others undertaking the rigors of a 500 mile walk, giving and getting the help you need on your way.

In the temple in the darkness, Samuel answered the God's call. And from that time on, Samuel walked with the Lord. In answering the call and walking with God, Samuel came to know the one who had known him so well.

Just so, Nathan, accepted Jesus' invitation to follow. From then on he

walked with Jesus, and in that journey came to know the One who knew him first. Just as Jesus promised, Nathan saw great things on his way. He experienced the passion and the resurrection of this Jesus whose call he had answered.

Today you and I are invited again to listen for the voice of the One who knows us better than we know ourselves. We are invited to come to know the God who already knows us and calls us by name, who loves us and this whole fractured world. We are invited to walk with Jesus and pursue his ministry of peace and mercy, of justice and healing here in the world where we live.