

Second Sunday after the Epiphany B
January 14, 2018

Grace Church/Lexington
Fr. James

I Samuel 3:1-20 Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17 I Corinthians 6:12-20 *John 1:43-51*

NEW BEGINNINGS

The world is awash with new beginnings.

The year

The season

The day

The cold

The ministry of Christ

Beginnings usually carry with them the element of hope and often surprise. They are times of wonder, times to be anticipated. It is also true that beginnings must by their nature speak of endings, sorry postludes, the dashed dream, the obscene failure, the death of one loved, a separation, a divorce, a lost job, the death of hope.

In the boy Samuel's day, the record relates not only the joy of Hannah his mother with overflowing, grateful heart, and the guilelessness of Samuel, but the corruption of the people, deceit even among the priests. The epitaph of that era reads: "And the

word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.”

You have heard the story. Samuel is called to by name and not recognizing the voice of God he runs three times to his master Eli to inquire of his wishes. “Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.” I wonder if the author meant to tie those two realities together? The word of the LORD may not be known by us because we have not yet come to know the LORD, to know the voice of God when it comes in the night, perhaps in a dream or thorough events in our lives or by virtue of a colleague or loved one. How can we hear the voice of God unless we know God, unless we are on sufficiently intimate terms to recognize the way he will work in our lives? Finally, Samuel listened and quit running and in the end “all of Israel...knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.”

In Jesus' day the nation Israel was again in a sorry state; following hard upon the heels of Maccabean victories, they were

now victim to Roman ambition—a conquered people—chafing against the harness of Roman rule.

Sorry preludes. Leftovers, colorless scraps from some former *au gratin* dish. Robert Frost wrote (A Patch of Old Snow):

There's a patch of old snow in a corner
that I should have guessed
was a blow-away paper the rain
had brought to rest.

It is speckled with grime as if
small print overspread it

The news of a day I've forgotten--
if I ever read it.

But for every day of soiled elements, there stands the hope of a new snowfall; a white blanket laid down flake by falling flake to cover the frozen mud, the dead weed, the bleak and barren soul-scape. And, oh, the joy of it. Children catch life, adults remember and try the sled again—a time or two—to re-capture the wind induced tear in the eye.

In the beginning, one steps forth and wrestles with the storm, exultant, for its fierce winds blow hope, and kindle new expectation.

Oh, what a night for the young Samuel. Eli had not called. God had. “Speak, Lord, for your servant hears.”

Nathaniel, the straightforward; Nathaniel, the good-hearted; Nathaniel, the guileless, sitting under a fig tree—so good, with nothing better on the horizon—all of a sudden face to face with Jesus—a man who knows him—and one who could not know him except that He, Jesus, be the Promised One, the God-sent one, the hope of all beginnings. Not goodness now for goodness sake, but goodness now for Christ's sake.

A vision of God
of the new fallen snow
of the deeds of men beginning
Clean, white, cold, fresh,
As the snow of God's breath.

It was for Nathaniel an indisputable call”

“I heard Him call and that was all.

My gold grew dim...my soul rose up and followed him.

Who would not follow when they heard that call?”

Memorable that beginning. Elie Wiesel once wrote: “When He created man, God gave him a secret—and that secret was not how to begin, but how to begin again. It is not given to us to begin: that privilege is God's alone. But it is given to us to begin again and we do so every time we choose to defy death and side with the living.”

Russ Carpentier began doing drugs at 17. He dealt, collected money and was hooked on crack. For him God was a big lie. He married his high school sweetheart, Lisa, and they drank together. He moved his young family to Colorado and eventually to a cabin up Barr Trail on Pikes Peak, but his friends and his habit followed him. A couple of twin gospel singers arrived one evening and there began for Russ a reluctant friendship that lasted for several years. The twins wrote Russ and Lisa from New Guinea and New Zealand and Russia..., and infrequently they showed up at

the cabin again. Russ records the following: “Early one morning, after being up all night, I was lying on a friend's sofa, starting to crash. I looked at my friend passed out in a chair and then at the crack pipe still in my hand. I can't do it. I can't quit. I pawed at my clothes. They were filthy. I remmebered when the Rostvit twins took us to church that first week. *If they could only see me now.* My own daughters came into my head. *What kind of father am I?* I started crying. I was out of excuses.

I dropped to my knees and did something I swore I'd never do. I turned to a God I didn't even believe in. *Okay, pal, listen. Everyone seems to think you care about me. I'm not so sure. But if you do care, please take this addiction away.*”

At that very instant I finished my sorry excuse for a prayer, something changed, something powerful, better than any drug rush I could imagine. I felt peace for the first time in 20 years. Not the numbness of drugs and drink, but a sense of overpowering wellness that spread through me. All of a sudden I knew, just knew, that God was real.” (Adapted from *Guideposts*, January 18,

2003. Last Stand on Pikes Peak)

The call of God? You've never heard it?

New birth? Do I hear someone say, “nonsense?”

'Kingdom of God? Someone cries, 'Balderdash'

'New beginnings?' Ephemeral as a new snow.

All beginnings can be ridiculed—indeed, can anything escape our cynicism? Only God can pull us from our daily experience and infuse us with a new loyalty—one beyond ourselves.

'It is better to be a part of beauty,' argued the moth in Marquis' dialogue between Archy and Mehitobel,

'it is better to be a part of beauty for one instant then cease to exist than to exist forever and never be a part of beauty.'

And records Archy,

'Before I could argue him out of his philosophy he went and immolated himself on a patent cigar lighter

I do not agree with him myself

I would rather have half the happiness and twice the longevity

but

--and here the cynic gives himself away—at the same time I wish there was something I wanted as badly as he wanted to fry himself.'

The day is fresh and cold and clean. Fall in love. Match your commitment, your inner being and your experience to that of Jesus Christ, and let us make Nathaniel's confession our own. Let us stand and in the words of the Nicene Creed, confess together...

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ....