

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – January 14, 2018

[1st Samuel 3:1-20](#) & [John 1:43-51](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Reflect on the provided questions
3. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”
4. Read the provided commentaries below
5. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)

Reflection Questions on 1st Samuel 3:1-20:

1. V. 1 says that “the word of the Lord was rare in those days.” Would that be an apt description of our own time? Do you believe that God is still speaking today? If so, how does God speak? And how does one distinguish what is truly of God, and what is just our subconscious/projections/wishful thinking, etc? If not, is there still a sense in which it would be right to speak of a divine “call” or “vision”?
2. Samuel was given bad news about Eli and his family in this story, which he then shared with his mentor. And yet without Eli’s guidance in recognizing God’s voice/call to Samuel, and his subsequent grace and submission in accepting the devastating news that came to him, Samuel would have presumably missed his divine calling. What do you make of this? Is it possible to separate the message and the messenger? Consider the fact that in the not too distant future, Samuel’s own sons would paint a very similar picture as Eli’s sons (see 1st Samuel 8)

Reflection Questions on John 1:43-51:

1. V 48 finds Nathanael asking Jesus, “Where did you get to know me?” What does it mean to be “known” by God/Jesus? Is such a thought comforting or scary?
2. V. 51 is often viewed as an allusion to “Jacob’s Ladder” (Genesis 28:10-22). What might Jesus be saying about himself by alluding to this vision?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?

Commentary on 1st Samuel 3:1-20 (From *Homiletics*; “Taking the Call” – January 14, 2018)

As the Israelites struggled to establish themselves and their faith in the midst of the Promised Land, it was difficult for them to keep a clear distinction between developing Yahwistic monotheism and the animistic polytheism of the Canaanites' Ba'alism. The Hebrews' assertion that there was only one true God meant that Yahweh was a mobile God. Yahweh could come and get the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, travel with them through the wilderness and guide them into a new land. Ba'al worship was based on belief in a localized deity -- a god tied to one place, whose jurisdiction was limited by specific boundaries. Shrines

and altars marked the especially sacred, but circumscribed, dwelling places of these local gods.

The appeal of identifying certain locations as favorite dwellings of gods seduced the Israelites into erecting regional houses for Yahweh as well. The permanent temple at Shiloh, where Eli and his sons served as priests, was one such place. In these early days of the Israelite faith, Shiloh was thought of as God's dwelling place, where a light always burned to symbolize that God was "home," and where an oracle could always be obtained by priestly rites and rituals. At Shiloh, the Israelites believed they had God's presence as a captive audience. The pitfalls of this belief became obvious when shrines in Jerusalem, Bethel, Dan, Samaria, Ophrah and Mizpah began popping up -- each claiming Yahweh's special presence.

Even if Yahweh were willing to put up with such sneaking Ba'alism, God was not about to stand for the kind of priestly shenanigans that are described in 2:12-17. Eli's sons abused and belittled the priestly office, the people who were making sacrifices, and, most of all, the honor of God. Eli's sons had nothing but open contempt for God and ultimate concern for themselves.

But as the writer describes the offensive state of affairs at Shiloh, a soft refrain, foreshadowing hope, keeps finding its way into the text. 1 Samuel 2:11, 18, 26 and 3:1 all introduce "the boy Samuel," describing his ongoing presence, his faithful service and his increasing growth in stature and respect. Samuel's positive development is held up in direct contrast to the declining conditions around him at the temple in Shiloh.

Not only are the priests corrupt and greedy, but the whole identity of Shiloh as a dwelling place of God is now suspect because "the word of the LORD was rare in those days; and there was no frequent vision" (3:1, RSV). Despite constant offerings and an uninterrupted priestly presence, if Yahweh was home, Yahweh wasn't answering the door or coming to the phone.

The actual call of Samuel is so rich in detail that it is tempting to try to make theological mountains out of textual molehills. Verse 2 describes Eli as one whose eyesight is dim and who is lying down. But if the author does a nice job of tying the lack of "vision" in with Eli's own failing "eyesight," it is also true that part of the message communicated here is simply that Eli is old. In the natural progression of life, this suggests that it is now time for a new generation to begin its work.

As this scene opens, then, it is night and both Eli and Samuel are resting in their appointed places inside the temple. The writer implies that despite the lack of "frequent vision," God's presence is still in this place, for he pointedly mentions both the still burning "lamp of God" and the holy presence of "the ark of God" (which was enshrined at Shiloh until David moved it to Jerusalem).

Samuel's vision of God, in good Israelite tradition, begins with a word. Nearly all the OT prophets speak in this form of mixed metaphor, identifying a divine vision with the spoken divine word. Samuel's eyes are opened only to the extent that his ears are open. Samuel runs back and forth between his bed and Eli's, trying to obediently answer what he believes to be his master's call.

It takes the characteristic three times for Eli to recognize that Samuel is hearing a call from the Lord. Just before Samuel receives his third call, the reader is given some astonishing additional information. Samuel -- whose mother had dedicated him to God's service from birth, who had grown up in the company of the priestly men of Shiloh, who had faithfully served Eli and had found "favor with the LORD and with the people" (2:26) -- "did not yet know the LORD" (v. 7). Although he had lived virtually all his life in what was believed to be the very dwelling place of God -- had in fact slept in front of the holy ark of the covenant -- "the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him."

After the third call, Eli acts as mentor for Samuel one last time by instructing him to go lie down and wait to hear the voice again. This time, Eli counsels, do not jump up and run around, but remain still and answer, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening" (v. 9).

It would be unwise to take the Lord's fourth call and appearance to Samuel in verse 10 as a literal apparition of God. The fact that Samuel's vision occurs only when he returns to his bed and lies down

suggests that God is speaking to Samuel, as God has with many other seers and sages, through dreams. That God appears to Samuel while he is asleep makes the vision no less tangible, no less authentic. Yahweh was not in the habit of making personal appearances before fragile human beings. In the few incidents where God's presence is actually revealed, the results are not always pleasant for the individual (Exodus 34:32-35).

Samuel responds to God's fourth call as his master Eli instructed. As a result, he receives his first "word of the LORD." But what a word! Imagine young Samuel's horror as the Lord describes to him what is in store for the house of Eli. The tradition of family or clan liability for the sins of a single member was well-established among all the people of the Near East, but God's plans are still shocking. In the case of Eli's family, God's decision to "punish his house forever" is based on the actions of several family members. Not only are Eli's notorious sons denounced for their blasphemy, but Eli himself is declared a party to their sins because he knew all that was going on and did not stop it (v. 13).

The guilt of Eli's house cannot be expiated by the standard means of sacrificial atonement because it is this very atoning system that the sons of Eli have treated with blasphemous contempt. Since they have no belief in the sanctity of the system, the system cannot work for them.

When Samuel is summoned by Eli, the young man is understandably afraid to deliver such devastating news to the aged priest. What Samuel does not know is that the Lord's message to him is simply the other shoe Eli has been waiting to hear drop since his own divinely sent messenger warned him in 2:27-36. Thus, despite the calamitous nature of Samuel's news, Eli appears neither shocked nor shaken by God's words. Though he has failed to control his children and safeguard the priesthood from corruption, Eli's final theological insight is sound: "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him" (v. 18).

Commentary on John 1:43-51 (From the *Homiletics* archive; "Rules of the Road" – Jan. 18, 2015)

John 1:43-51 continues an account of Jesus' calling of the disciples that began in verses 35-42 with an invitation to discipleship extended to Andrew and Peter. Today's pericope recounts the addition of two more disciples: Philip and Nathanael.

Verse 43 begins with an indicator of time. According to John's timeline, this is the fourth day in a series of events (cf. "the next day" earlier in vv. 29 and 35). This timeline will get rather disrupted, however, with the indication in 2:1 that the events at Cana happen on "the third day." It seems more likely that John is simply helping to move the narrative along by using these "days" as transition phrases rather than that the Fourth Evangelist is attempting to provide an accurate historical timeline.

In the Greek, the subject of the first verb in verse 43 is unspecified. The figure in closest proximity to this verb is actually Peter (v. 42), but given the account that comes next, it is probably correct to follow the NRSV in supplying "Jesus" as the subject of the verb "decided" as it would be odd for Peter to issue the invitation "Follow me." However, such an invitation makes sense on the lips of Jesus who has previously made a similar offer to Andrew and Peter.

Philip's heeding of Jesus' call goes through without a hitch. John does not explicitly indicate that Philip follows, as in the case of Andrew and Peter in verse 39. However, this seems to be the logical conclusion as John immediately describes Philip as going to report to Nathanael his discovery of Jesus (v. 45). Notably, only John's gospel lists Nathanael among the disciples. None of the lists of disciples found in the other gospels (Matthew 10:1-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:13-16) list him among the Twelve.

Although Philip seems enthusiastic about Jesus, describing him as the one foretold by Moses and the prophets (v. 45), Nathanael, unlike the other disciples thus far, takes some convincing. Rather than simply taking Philip at his word, Nathanael questions whether anything good can come from Nazareth. This question is rather ironic. Although Nathanael believes that he knows Jesus' origin (since Philip just told him as much, v. 45), the prologue to John's gospel suggests that Jesus' earthly roots are not what is relevant here. Indeed, the eternal word comes from above (3:31), having been with God since the

beginning (v. 1). Yet, Nathanael, like Jesus' interlocutors in 6:42, will mistakenly assume that knowing that Jesus is from Nazareth is enough to determine where he has come from. Nathanael's initial doubts about Jesus are not unlike the doubts that will later be expressed by another disciple. After Jesus' resurrection, it takes Thomas some extra effort to come to belief (20:24-29). However, just as Thomas eventually progresses in his faith to the point that he is able to confess Jesus as "my Lord and my God" (20:28), so too, Nathanael will get past his initial suspicion to make a similarly positive statement about Jesus' identity (v. 49).

If Nathanael is initially suspicious of Jesus' efficacy, Jesus has nearly the opposite reaction to Nathanael. Jesus' commendation of Nathanael as "an Israelite in whom there is no deceit" is friendly, if unexpected (v. 47). The use of the word "Israelite" here is rather odd. Elsewhere in John's gospel, "Jews" will be used to describe a group that is frequently antagonistic toward Jesus (e.g., 5:10; 6:41; 6:52; 7:1; 8:48). However, "Israelite" here evidently has a different connotation for the Fourth Evangelist. This is the only place in any of the gospels where the word is used, and so it is difficult to determine exactly how John understood it. Nonetheless, given the rest of Jesus' statement here, it is evidently a favorable term.

Nathanael rightly wonders how Jesus came to know him (v. 48). Jesus' enigmatic response is that he saw Nathanael under the fig tree. There is some debate among commentators about the significance of the fig tree here. Some suggest that it is merely a way of saying that Nathanael was at home. Others, however, point to texts in rabbinic literature (such as *b. Erubin* 54a) where the Torah is compared to a fig tree and searching for figs is used as a metaphor for the study of the Law. However, regardless of the significance of the tree, Jesus' observation is evidently powerful enough to evoke a response of high Christology from Nathanael who calls Jesus a rabbi, the Son of God and the King of Israel (v. 49).

In typical Johannine fashion, just when it seems as though all that could be said has been said, Jesus interjects a final thought. In this case, Jesus suggests to Nathanael that if Nathanael is impressed by what he has seen thus far, he has more to look forward to. Just as Nathanael's initial doubt is similar to the hesitancy that Thomas will express later in the gospel (20:25), so, too, is Jesus' response to Nathanael similar to the one that he will give to Thomas (20:29). In both cases, Jesus asks a question of his conversation partner and then points to a higher good.

The higher good that Jesus acknowledges to Nathanael in verse 51 is a rather odd statement about the Son of Man. The first oddity of this statement is that Jesus seems to be addressing not just Nathanael, but a larger audience, perhaps the gospel's readers. Though it cannot be conveyed in English (except, perhaps, with the colloquial "y'all"), the Greek word for "you" here is plural rather than singular. As will happen later in the conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, Jesus here will move practically seamlessly from a second person singular to a second person plural address. This move has the effect of including the gospel's audience in the conversation.

In this case, Jesus' teaching is an unusual one filled with OT imagery. The Son of Man figure is familiar from Daniel 7:13, but the reference to the ascent and descent of angels seems to be alluding to Jacob's vision of a ladder in Genesis 28:12. Jesus never clarifies for Nathanael what this teaching means, but the ambiguity of the statement evidently does not deter Nathanael in his discipleship. Having been invited to join Jesus' circle, Nathanael apparently stays in the group as he is mentioned again among the group of disciples described in 21:2. One encounter with Jesus is all that it takes for Nathanael to follow.

Additional Resources

- [“The Text this Week”](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).