

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Second Sunday After The Epiphany
14 January 2018

Scripture readings:

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

John 1:43-51

The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. Sound familiar? I don't think those days are much different from our own. We're suspicious of people who have visions, and we're often suspicious - even afraid - of people who share the word of the Lord honestly, faithfully, straightforwardly. And that's at the beginning of this extraordinarily beautiful story of God calling Samuel who is called to deliver a very, very unpopular message to Eli. They haven't done a good job as the Church. Samuel is being asked to proclaim God's truth to those who have missed the point. I suppose the business of the lesson from 1 Samuel and the gospel today from John of the calling of Nathaniel by Jesus who sees him before he meets him and impresses him with the knowledge that here is a man without guile even though he comes from a dump place called Nazareth.

There's a Nazareth near Bethlehem in Pennsylvania where Martin guitars are still made. Those places, by the way, were named in reference to biblical places by the Moravians, our brothers and sisters, in the 18th century in the 1740s when they were settled.

The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. But then at the end of the gospel lesson, *And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."* That's Jesus speaking. Well, you know how I am. I doubt that Jesus ever said those words. But I do think that the Church said those words about Jesus.

Another place not far from Nazareth in Pennsylvania is a little jerkwater cement town called Bath. There is another place which is not jerkwater or the home of cement, but the ancient location of historic thermal baths in England. In Bath you can still drink the warmth from the warm springs that were there in pre-Christian times, in Roman times, if you take yourself to what's called The Pump Room, a lovely restaurant there. The springs come through fountains into the restaurant, and they will gladly give you a glass of stinking, putrid, awful-tasting, filthy, warm water which is touted to be good for your health! *[laughter]*

But the thing I want to call your attention to about Bath is if you go out of The Pump Room and turn right, you will walk right into the facade of a very great and gracious ancient church building called the Bath Abbey - a beautiful building which is fan-vaulted which is a wonderful way of making ceilings that look like fans, and they're held up by what are called pendant keystones. You know how a keystone supports an arch in the middle. Well, these are keystones that hang from the ceiling, and they suspend gorgeous tracery that looks like fans. It's breathtakingly beautiful. What's important for us today about Bath Abbey is that on both sides of the great portal, the west door, running all the way up the front facade of Bath Abbey are carved in stone two ladders, and going up and down on the ladders are scores of little angels - many of them so old that they've lost their wings and their heads and their feet, and so forth, but there's no question that the major symbolic effort in carving the facade of that building was to tell the story of Jacob's ladder more so than the ending of the gospel today when Jesus says, *"I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."* But guess where I think they got that idea? Jacob's ladder was a vision he had when he was being pursued by Esau, having stolen the birthright and is interpreted in various and many ways. But even in our common usage today we understand that somehow in the tradition of faith there has been a communication between heaven and earth, and we tend to call those people who believe that God is a good and loving God and creator of the whole thing, that God communicates with human beings and this is early telephony, early communication, early wireless, early computer, early whatever you want to call it, where God communicates God's message to people.

When other people are particularly loving and helpful to us and we understand that we have received a godly grace, we call them - not telephones, not computers - we call them angels. The word angel itself from Greek means a messenger. It doesn't have much to do with feathered wings and all the rest of it, but it's the job of one who carries a message to another.

As Christians we are aware that we have a particular message to carry, that we have a particular job as potential angels to communicate the love of God. We are in the business of celebrating in every liturgy we celebrate

here Word and Sacrament - communicating the love of God by remembering who's the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us - Jesus. We're not talking about words - and this is a great and profoundly serious error that I think is being made today. Be careful with this, particularly with your conservative right-wing Christian friends who will talk to you about the Bible as the Word of God. That's bunk!

There is no such thing as "the Bible." The Bible is not a thing. The Bible is an anthology of texts gathered from several thousand years of authorship, canonized by a bunch of men into a selection that has stood for the Church as a great basis for belief, but from which other writings of the periods were excluded, and that's why in our early days we would talk about "a Catholic Bible." What did that mean? Well, not that Mary appeared in it because she appeared in Protestant Bibles but was ignored. It means there were certain other books of scripture known as the Apocrypha, books of doubtful origin which were included in that anthology that weren't included in others.

But we're talking about the Word of God, not words about God., but the Word of God becoming flesh and living among us, full of grace and truth, and understanding ourselves as communicators of that Word to ourselves and then together communicating that Word - *logos* is the Greek word - not words, but the truth of God to the rest of the world.

Now my friend in Rome this morning preached to a thinner crowd than usual because it's bitter cold in Rome apparently. (People were wearing scarves and jackets.) And all the hoopla of Christmas is over now. We're down to the nitty-gritty of what's called in the Roman Calendar "Ordinary Time." The figures are gone from St. Peter's Square, and the tree is gone. But the Holy Father explained that today was a 104th annual celebration of the day to commemorate migrants and refugees in the Vatican. He didn't do that because he read the American papers this week. That's been done for 104 years! He did announce, however, that next year the date will be moved, I think, to the 8th of September so that it can be paid more attention and not be lost in the celebration of Epiphany, as I understood it.

The pope suggested four things that we need to remember about migrants and refugees. The first is that our job as Christians, as people who believe that the Word of God became flesh and lives among us and has a message for us to share. The first thing we must do with migrants and refugees is to welcome them. The second is to provide for them, and the third is to promote them. The fourth is to integrate them into our society. A hundred and four years of the Church's understanding of how to deal with people who come to pick our crops, people who come seeking protection and political asylum, people who come looking for opportunities which are denied them elsewhere. A hundred and four years of speaking God's truth, of representing the Word of God which becomes flesh and lives among us, to foreigners, to people who are different from ourselves, and to people who bring to us in their poverty untold resources and wealth without which we could not possibly live as well as we do now.

This is not news. This is Christianity. This is our job, and we believe and teach and preach Christ as King, God as creator of the whole world and all who are in it. And my guess is that this morning Samuel was being given a message to deliver to Eli and to his sons and that priesthood that nationalism was a mistake and only leads to war and people's desire to prove their superiority and to subjugate others by killing them. That is an old and religious idea, believe you me, that still has legs - and not wings! It still has legs particularly among particularly conservative Christian people who see the Bible as the Word of God and who miss the truth of Jesus as God's *logos*. It's a subtle usurpation of the truth.

And so we read with sobriety, on this 104th celebration of migrants and refugees, these texts and we remember that God called Samuel to deliver a message of truth - unwanted truth - to Eli and his gang, that Jesus comes as the truth in flesh to live among us and invites us to believe that if we see him we will receive directly from God that message of good news - good tidings we just sang - glad tidings of good news for *all people, for all people*, and then you and I will be seen by others as messengers, winged creatures who carry God's message of love to all people everywhere at all times despite the fact that the Word of the Lord is rare in these days and visions are not widespread. But that doesn't mean that *we* don't hear, and it doesn't mean that we don't see God with us! Amen.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.