Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Second Sunday after Epiphany

January 14, 2018

Neal MacPherson

KNOWN BY GOD 1 Samuel 3:1–20

Psalm 139:1–18; 23, 24

John 1:43–51

*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 bright as the day,*

*for darkness is as light to you. —*Psalm 139:7–12

The Psalmist affirms that God knows him intimately and completely, and that there is no way that he can flee from God’s presence. The same goes for us, but that does not seem to prevent us from trying. We humans have a knack for finding ways to avoid God’s call to faithful discipleship. We flee to the gods of convenience and security, comfort and selfishness, all in an effort to escape the ever-present God, who never ceases to summon us to faithful living.

It all begins with God’s knowledge of us. The Psalmist seems to say that God knows us even better than we know ourselves:

*You search out my path and my lying down,*

*and are acquainted with all my ways,*

*Even before a word is on my tongue,*

*O Lord, you know it completely.*

*You hem me in, behind and before,*

*and lay your hand upon me.*

*Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;*

*it is so high I cannot attain it. (*vs. 3-6)

*My frame was not hidden from you,*

*when I was being made in secret,*

*intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

*Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.*

*In your book were written*

*all the days that were formed for me,*

*when none of them as yet existed.*  (vs. 15, 16)

God knows us better than we know ourselves, and at the heart of God’s knowing us, there is a mystery. Remembering that in John’s Gospel the ways of God are revealed the ways of the Son, that mystery at the heart of God’s knowing us is captured when Jesus calls both Phillip and Nathanial. Phillip appears on the scene and it seems that Jesus has known him forever. Why else would Phillip follow Jesus without hesitation? And when Nathanial asks Jesus, “Where did you get to know me,” Jesus answers, “I saw you under the fig tree before Phillip called you.” It is as if Jesus has always known Nathanial, which leads Nathanial to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. It is all so mysterious, so wonderful, but also just a little frightening. Perhaps that is why the Psalmist declares that he is fearfully and wonderfully made.

And, turning to our passage from the Hebrew scriptures, God must have known Samuel better than Samuel knew himself when he called him to be a prophet to Eli’s household. God chooses Samuel to be the greatest of all of Israel’s judges.

The calling of Samuel when he was just a boy is intriguing. God had to call him three times before he was ready to acknowledge that it was God who was calling him. Ironically, it was Eli who discerned that it was God who was calling Samuel in the night. And so it is that others sometimes lead us to recognize God’s call to us.

As we all know, this is the weekend we celebrate the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. In an insightful and poignant article, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove describes King’s call to prophetic ministry.[[1]](#footnote-1) Just as Samuel was called three times before he accepted his call to prophetic ministry, so was Dr. King called three times. As a young man, something of a prodigy, going to college early, mastering the art of public speaking, and then earning a Ph.D. in theology, King had a first call to be the minister of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The second call came from God by way of an unlikely source. Her name was Rosa Parks and she refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus to a white man simply because she was too tired to move. She was arrested and so began the Montgomery Bus boycott. Dr. King was persuaded to join the cause and he was soon acknowledged as a promising leader of an emerging movement for racial equality. King, though, encountered such hatred, including death threats, that he wanted nothing to do with the movement. Then, God came a third time, and this time is was Jesus who came calling. Jesus came in the middle of a winter night, when King was overwhelmed with fear after receiving yet another call from someone angrily threatening his life. King, at the kitchen table, bowed his head in frustration, and then, by his own account, “Something said to me: ‘You can’t call on Daddy now, you can’t call on Momma. You’ve got to call on that something in that person that your daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way.” In the dark of night, Jesus came calling on Dr. King, and he was never the same again. Could we not say that God knew Martin Luther King, Jr. in a way no other could have known him.

And this weekend is also the weekend we observe the overthrow of Queen Liliuo‘kalani, one hundred and twenty-five years ago. It was the queen who wrote *The Queen’s Prayer*, which is fast becoming a beloved response among us. The English translation speaks volumes:

*Your love is in heaven and your truth so perfect.*

*I live in sorrow imprisoned; you are my light,*

*your glory my support. Behold not with malevolence*

*the sins of humankind, but forgive and cleanse.*

*And so, O Lord, beneath your wings be our peace*

*forever more.*

God knew Queeen Lili‘uokalani more completely than she perhaps knew herself. Could it be that this was why she was led to a firm belief, as Martin Luther King after her, in the power and rightness of non-violence. When her subjects wanted to resort to violence and disturbance in order to defend her right to be their sovereign, she restrained them. She writes in her memoir:

The people listened to my voice, and obeyed

my will with a submission that kept the

community free from disorder far more than any

law or restraint of that which has called itself a

government. Many a time have I heard that the

Hawaiians would no longer submit to their

oppressors, that they were about to appeal to

fire and the sword; but I have always persuaded

them from commencing any such measures.[[2]](#footnote-2)

God knew Queen Lili‘uokalani, and hearing God’s call, she maintained the peace of her people in her troubled time.

And what of us? God also knows us completely and intimately. And with us also it can take God several times to reach us in the depths of our being. We like to think that we wait upon God, but it is perhaps even truer that God waits upon us, waits, waits, until we say “yes” to the calling.

There is always a danger in describing how God speaks to a Samuel, or a Philip, or a Nathanial, or a Martin Luther King, Jr., or to a Queen Lili`uokalani. None of us would describe ourselves as equal to them in their call and their mission. And yet we too are known by God, and we too are called. God searches after us, and knows us. I close this sermon with my favorite quote from Martin Luther King, Jr. In a sermon called “The Drum Major Instinct,” he spoke these words to remind us that we too are known by God and that we too are called:

And so Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If

you want to be important—wonderful. If you

want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want

to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he

who is greatest among you shall be your servant.

That’s your new definition of greatness. And this

morning, the thing that I like about it. . . by

giving that definition of greatness, it means that

everybody can be great. Because everybody can

serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to

serve. You don’t have to make your subject and

your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know

about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t

have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to

serve. You don’t have to know the second theory

of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only

need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by

love. And you can be that servant.[[3]](#footnote-3)

My sisters and brothers, God knows us and calls us, even the likes of us. Shall we say “yes” to the calling, fear not the falling, and trust in God’s plan? By God’s grace, may we so do. Amen.

1. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *“The Spiritual Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.” http://www.relevantmagazine .com/life/current-events/features/24131-the-spiritual-legacy-of-martin-luther-king-jr* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Queen Lili‘uokalani, *Hawaii’s Story* 9Honolulu: Mutual Publishing, 1990) 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Martin Luther King, *The Drum Major Instinct,”* The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Harper Collins, 1986) 266-267. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)