

Sermon for 1/15/12
Epiphany 2B

I don't think that today's Gospel tells us the whole story.
It's John's account of when Jesus began to call his disciples after his baptism in the Jordan.
Philip invited Nathanael to come meet Jesus.
Jesus sees them coming and says, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"
Nathanael seems surprised and asks Jesus how he knows him.
Jesus said, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."
And here's where we're missing part of the story; doesn't Nathanael's immediate reaction seem a bit over-enthusiastic to you?
"Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"
It's a long leap to get from "I saw you under the fig tree" all the way to "You are the Son of God!"
Clearly, there's a part of the story that we're missing; there's something that we don't know about how Nathanael was called to follow Jesus.
But, somehow, it was enough for him.
It doesn't make sense to us but it made perfect sense to Nathanael, enabling him to leave everything behind to follow Jesus.

I've been blessed with a few moments when I felt as if God might be calling me to something more.
I've preached about them before so I don't want to belabor them this morning.
I hope you'll trust me when I tell you that I've had moments when I've been particularly aware of God's presence in my life and moments when I've felt God calling me to do something.
And, please *do* trust me, I don't think that I'm crazy.
You may have a different opinion, but that's a topic for another time.

I've known some "crazy" people in my life.
I've met people who take the simplest little event and decide that it's a sign from God.
Once, about 25 years ago, I made a simple error when I was giving out communion.
As I handed a woman the bread I said, "The blood of Christ, the cup of salvation."
Later that morning she told me that she took that mistake as a sign from God that she should leave the Episcopal Church and become a Roman Catholic.
If my mental lapses really are a call to become Roman Catholic, I would have been the most successful recruiter in the history of the church!

So what does a call look like?
If you're truly blessed, it looks like Jesus saying that he saw you under a fig tree or you hear a voice calling you in the night the way Samuel did in our Old Testament reading this morning.
But for most of us, it's a bit more subtle than that.
The call can be a feeling that just won't go away, a sense that there's something you ought to be paying more attention to.
It can come from a sudden conviction that you need to be involved in a certain effort – a conviction that could be inspired by a sermon or a random TV commercial: God can use anything to issue a call.
The clearest call most of us will ever get happens when someone invites us to take on a new responsibility or ministry.
Whatever form the call takes, it usually leaves you with a sense of possibility, hope, and promise; it will almost always just feel like the right thing to do.

Once we think we hear a call of some sort the next task is to figure out if it really is coming from God or is just some form of elaborate self-delusion.
The best way to do that comes from having a strong background in the faith.
Is what you think you're being called to do consistent with scripture and the traditions of the church?
For example, if you start wondering if you're called to decapitate your neighbor because he doesn't mow his lawn often enough, a simple look at scripture is a reminder that we're not supposed to kill other people.

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However, if the call is one to serve others or to care for your own spiritual health, there's a pretty good chance that the call is coming from God.

Another way to test your call is to talk to a spiritual advisor of some sort. You might have a conversation with a friend whose opinion and faith you trust; someone who knows you well and cares about faith might be able to give you some very good feedback. Or you might want to take advantage of your local neighborhood parish priest. I won't claim that Brian and I have all the answers, but we might be able to help you be sure that you're asking all the questions that you need to ask. At some point, a true calling from God will be ratified by other people.

However, given all that, you're still the best judge of the authenticity of what you believe God may be calling you to do. If there's a feeling about your faith that you just can't get rid of, pay attention to it because God just might be calling you to do something. God may be calling you to take a less demanding job so that you have more time with your family. God may be calling you to take on more responsibilities as a volunteer. God may be calling you to keep working to make your marriage a success – or – God may be calling you to get out of a dangerous marriage as quickly and as safely as you can. God may be calling you to pray more regularly to begin to figure out how you might start praying with your friends.

The list of possible calls is never-ending. It depends on and is particular to you. It might not make any sense to anyone else, but if it makes sense to you, if it's consistent with the faith as we have received it, then you owe it to yourself to follow that call. It will enrich and improve your life far more than you might expect. When you're doing what God is really calling you to do, it is fulfilling and joyful and good. It fills those parts of your life that you want to have filled.

How do you start looking for and answering your call?
Step by step.
Test it out.
Pay attention to what's going on around you.
Try something new to see if it feels right.
You'll probably never be able to guess ahead of time where God's call will lead you, but you will know, once you get there, that it was the right thing to do.
It doesn't matter who you are – a bishop or a newcomer to the church, a sinner or a saint, someone with plenty of time or someone who can't get it all done – God is calling you to deeper faith and to greater ministry.
Answer that call.
It's what God wants you to do.
And you'll discover that doing what God wants you to do will be the most rewarding choice you'll ever make.