

I Samuel 3:1-10
John 1: 43-51

“The ‘Unlikely’ Ones”

R.P.C.
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Last week, in those first, stirring poetic cadences of his Gospel, John told us that ‘the word has become flesh and dwelt among us.’ But do we really believe that? The word – the eternal reality of God – among us? Really among us ... today?

Perhaps that is why on this second Sunday after Epiphany as the church year gets rolling, we have two accounts to address: one from the Hebrew Scriptures and one from the New Testament. Each account in its own way demonstrates the reality of the incarnation... the word of God among us... really among us.

We just heard the passage about the little boy Samuel who was perhaps the youngest person to receive a direct word from God – a call from God. He was working for old Eli in the temple, probably sleeping near Eli on a cot, helping the old priest with maintaining the rituals and property within the temple. Then one night Samuel hears his name called: “Samuel, Samuel!” The little lad assumes Eli is summoning him. But not so ... so Eli tells the boy to go back to sleep. Then the voice breaks the silence of the night again. “No,” says Eli, “I didn’t call you.” The voice comes a third time, and this time Samuel says, “Here I am, Lord.”

Do we catch the full irony of this account? Why would God call this little boy? Why would God speak to an immature, inexperienced lad, who was not a member of some great and prestigious family? If God had something important that needed saying or doing in the world, why wouldn’t God go through the more mature priest, Eli? I’ll bet that even Eli thinks it is quite odd for God to be conversing, much less calling a young boy like Samuel. Isn’t it strange how God often speaks to people and in places where we do not expect the great God to speak? No wonder John could say, as we heard last week, “He (Jesus) came to his own, and his own people did not accept him” (1:11).

Then in today’s New Testament text, Nathanael, upon hearing from Philip about Jesus, asks, “Can anything worth anything arise from a dusty, out- of- the way place like Nazareth?” Again it is the case of God speaking through a person and at a place where we would not expect the great God to speak. Yet then, after Nathanael meets Jesus face-to-face, and Jesus says he saw him under a fig tree, the amazed Nathanael responds with, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the king of Israel!”

This exchange too is an example of how God works – sometimes through a little boy like Samuel; sometimes through a scoffing person like Nathanael... and sometimes through a crusty old preacher like ... Carl Parker.....

You may never have heard of the Reverend Carl Lafayette Parker. But that is because you have probably never heard of Pee Dee, Wampee, Little River, or Edgeland either. I had not heard of Carl until I recently read about him, though I have heard of most of those places. For over 50 years Carl Parker preached the gospel at out-of-the-way places with names like that up in that sparsely-populated area between Myrtle Beach, South Carolina and the North Carolina state line.

Carl's father before him was a Methodist preacher. So was his stepmother, who was the first Methodist woman preacher in South Carolina. So I guess we could say that "preachin' was in Carl's blood."

Shortly after being ordained, at his first Annual Conference, Carl's preacher/father asked him, "Son, where would you like the bishop appoint you?" Carl replied, "Well, Daddy, I'll take a vow to go wherever the bishop sends me." "I really don't have anywhere in mind." "But I do know where I hope NOT to go." "I would just as soon take a ticket right to Hades as to be appointed to that church down at Ridgeland." Carl's preacher/father had served that church when Carl was just a boy and the experience had not been a good one.

The next day, the younger Parker saw his father in the hallway of the place where the Annual Conference was taking place. "Son, I just had a conversation with the bishop," said Carl's father. "You just got your ticket punched ... to Hades."

Carl later told a family member that the first summer in Ridgeland it was so hot that the flowers on the communion table withered before the service was over. Even the candles drooped and melted. Though air conditioning was available in the late 1950's, the legendarily tight-fisted congregation refused to install an air conditioning system. The congregation had one ceiling fan and they had those hand-held fans from the local mortuary to wave, but the temperatures were well into the 90's.

One Sunday Carl told the congregation: "I was supposed to preach on a well-known parable of our Lord this morning." "But the parable ends with the wicked being thrown into the eternal fires of hell." "Not wanting so early in my ministry to offend any of you by criticizing our place of residence, I decided to preach on another text."

“But just let me say ... that you people are going to fool around and kill me up here in this pulpit.” “Hell apparently holds no terror for any of you who manage to sit through these services in the middle of the summer....” The next week, a campaign was launched to buy air conditioning for the sanctuary. It was a milestone in Low Country, South Carolina, as Ridgeland was the first Methodist church to acquire central air conditioning.

Later, Carl Parker served as a District Superintendent in the Marion District of the Methodist Church, which is like serving as a Presbytery Executive in one of our Presbyterian presbyteries. The District Superintendent does not serve one particular congregation, but supervises those preachers and churches within the district. That meant that Reverend Parker spent many Sundays in the pew, rather than in a pulpit - a situation he disliked, because he liked to preach.

One particular Sunday, Carl Parker attended a church where the minister was known as a ‘master of ambiguity and equivocation.’ This minister had the habit of making a statement in a sermon, and then ‘hedging’ on that statement with all kinds of exceptions, without committing himself to any one interpretation, so as not to offend anyone; in other words, he was trying to be excessively “politically correct.”

Rev. Parker squirmed in his pew as the preacher carefully qualified about every statement he made in that sermon. Rev. Parker withdrew his large railroad pocket watch from his pocket at five-minute intervals throughout the entire sermon. (The watch had been given to him by some congregation in the past as a reminder for Carl not to preach too long.) He would gaze at his watch, visibly and vigorously shake his head, and thrust the watch back into his pocket, and groan slightly.

The poor preacher continued to flail away at his sermon, thrashing at his subject, rather than delivering it: “Ah ... we need to be more committed to Christ ... but not the point of fanaticism, not to the neglect of other important responsibilities,” he said. “We need to have a greater dedication to the work of the church. Now I don’t mean that the church is the only significant organization of which you are members. Most of us have obligations to various community groups.” And so on and so forth went the sermon.

Every five minutes or so, with some ceremony, Rev. Parker withdrew his gold railroad watch and opened it to look at it. He would look surprised at how little time had transpired since his last glance, then snap it closed, and slapped it back in his pocket with a look of regret.

After the service, some other clergy candidates and seminary students who were in the Superintendent's visiting party brushed right past Reverend Milk Toast and gathered with Carl Parker out in the church parking lot. Pausing for a moment, Carl whirled around, pointed a finger at all the candidates for ministry and thundered: "If God should ever be calling you into the pastoral ministry, and if you should ever be given a church by a bishop, and if God every gives you a word to say... for God's sake, just say it!" And with that Reverend Carl Parker jumped in his car and left.

Carl Parker served and aged until it was time for him to retire. But there were some little churches without pastors in the district. When the new District Superintendent was appointed, he asked Carl if he would be willing to serve two of those churches. He agreed to do so, and in his mid-70's Carl went back in the pulpit for another near two decades.

On a pleasant June day, after he had announced that he was THIS TIME, really completely, absolutely retiring, the little church had a special day for Carl's last day of preaching. The little church was packed – about 100 people.

Reverend Parker preached on one of his favorite texts in Romans, where the Apostle Paul sings of the height and depth, the breadth and the width of the love of God. It was Father's Day and Carl mused a bit in the beginning of the sermon human father," Rev. Parker said. "And yet the love of God is deeper, richer, and more persistent even than the love of the most wonderfully dedicate human father," Rev. Parker said.

And then he recited from memory one of his favorite stories told by Jesus – the account of the shepherd seeking the lost sheep. That thought caused Carl to digress even more into something Rev. Parker had seen on TV the night before – the planned execution of a convicted murderer who was on death row in the penitentiary on Columbia. He then gave a detailed rendition of the crimes for which the man had been convicted and sentenced. And then reflected, "And yet, according to today's text, and the beautiful story which Jesus told, God Almighty would go to Columbia, to death row and seek this man out; he would stand beside him and plead with him until the man repents, takes his last breath, and then God would bring him home. And furthermore, when God reaches this lost one, Jesus says that there is more joy in heaven about our love and gratitude for our fathers. "And yet, the love of God is deeper, richer and more persistent even than the love of the most wonderfully dedicated over this one lost sheep coming home that on 99 righteous people like us. (Joe, how many people would you say we have here today? I'd say about 99.) Every day

God seeks until all hundred are safe in the fold. What a great God we have!" It should probably be noted that after that sermon, the people in that little church seemed much more willing for Preacher Parker to go ahead and retire!

Here's my point with all of this: (Don't you love it when the preacher finally gets to the point?): On the basis of this morning's scriptures, if God can call the little boy Samuel, bypassing the theologically informed, pious, priestly Eli; if God can call the scoffing Nathanael, in spite of his doubts and criticisms about people from Nazareth; if God can become the word of God incarnate in a lowly and eventually crucified carpenter's son named Jesus; if God could call Carl Parker, even though his personality was at odds with many of the personality characteristics that we think clergy ought to have – well then, God can call, use and bless others even through us.

Oftentimes our preconceptions of just how God will or will not act will determine what we see of God. We can actually be prevented from encounters with God because we do not expect God to be present with us at certain inauspicious moments and through certain inauspicious people – like us! Perhaps in accounts like the calling of young Samuel or the calling of Nathanael, scripture is teaching us to keep our eyes open – ready to be surprised when God shows up in unlikely places and among unlikely people. This seems to be the way of a God who appeared among us as one who we did not expect.

God often calls unlikely ones to do God's work. God sometimes does not work through the people or the channels that we expect, but works through the "wrong" people from the "wrong" places, to accomplish God's good purposes for the world. Most of us in one way or another are the "wrong" people. Yet God calls who God calls; God uses who God uses; and God blesses the world in the ways that God chooses to bless the world.

In Carl Parker's last days, as family members sat by his bedside, attempting to offer him some comfort, his son-in-law said: "Well, Preacher Parker, it looks like the Lord is going to give you a peaceful passing."

Carl Parker roused briefly, opened his eyes and said: "With some of the sorry churches I've served, the Lord owes it to me." Shortly after, Carl Lafayette Parker answered God's final call and said, "Here I am, Lord!" Amen.