

Sermon  
Epiphany 2—B-2  
January 17, 2021  
St. Andrew's, Methuen  
William Bradbury

1 Samuel 3:1-10(11-20)  
Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17  
1 Corinthians 6:12-20  
John 1:43-51

Have you ever had an STE? That's not a medical event, but a spiritual one: STE is A Spiritually Transformative Experience. It is an experience that causes a fundamental shift in worldview and draws you closer to God.

The Apostle Paul's encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus would be one of the most dramatic and well-known: that experience shifted Paul from persecuting the church to proclaiming the good news of the Church found in Jesus Christ.

Most of us do not have this kind of radical encounter with God until we are dying, but I believe many do have spiritual experiences that gently push them into a deeper awareness and love of God and neighbor.

I know a woman who was riding home from college years ago, looking at passing farmland and then for a few brief moments experienced a sense of everything connected in one luminous web of life. In that flash she experiences what she sees and who she is as one interconnected reality. The STE lasted only a minute or two, but it opened up her soul to the spiritual nature of reality in a way that changed the direction of her life. Ten years later she goes to seminary to become a priest.

Novelist and Christian writer Frederick Buechner tells of when his college age daughter was in a Vermont hospital dying of anorexia. Her not eating was killing her body but Buechner realized that his own desperate attempts to control life was starving his soul.

One day on his way home from the hospital he is overcome with grief and has to pull off the road. As he falls apart a car goes by with a license tag printed with the one word in the whole lexicon of words he most needs to see: it is the word "trust".

Trust.

In that dark moment Buechner finds God walking with him.

He found out later that the driver of the car was a Trust Officer in a bank. The man actually brought the license tag to him when he heard this story. Buechner says that license tag sits on his bookshelf as holy a relic as there is.

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 Many people have these kinds of experiences, but seldom talk about them. Sometimes they question their sanity or just pass it off as a meaningless intuition.

Sometimes they tell their clergy, but are often told not to mess around with such New Age nonsense.

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 But we wouldn't think this way, if we paid more attention to what the Bible clearly reveals.

This morning in the reading from First Samuel, the boy Samuel, sleeping in the shrine at Shiloh in the days before the Temple has been built, has a spiritual experience that he can't process: he hears someone calling out, "Samuel, Samuel", but he thinks it is the old priest Eli calling to him. This happens three times, so that finally, Eli tells Samuel that it must be God calling to him and that he should reply, **"Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."**

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 But a voice in your head may be saying, "Yeah, Paul and Samuel are Biblical heroes, surely God treats them differently than us.

**I want to suggest this is a cope-out and a failure to realize scripture is written, not just to tell us what happened in the past but to tell us what is happening in the present.**

This morning Jesus tells Nathanael he saw him under a fig tree and Nathanael is so impressed he proclaims Jesus as "son of God and King of Israel."

But notice Jesus's response: he says, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? **You will see greater things than these.**" And he says 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."**

Jesus is telling him that even ordinary Nathanael will have Spiritually Transformative Experiences involving Jesus that will rock his world by opening him to spiritual reality, just like happened to Jacob in his dream of the stairway to heaven—Jacob's ladder—in Genesis 28:12.

Jesus is telling us that **we too will have can have such experiences because Jesus—Crucified and Risen--is the portal into God.**

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 Speaking or ordinary people: Did you notice in our second lesson Paul is writing to the church in Corinth **about prostitutes!**

He says: "Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a **prostitute?**" Apparently, some have been frequenting the sacred prostitutes connected with the pagan temples.

**Yet, even to folks who use sex workers, Paul says this:**

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price...."

If we are a temple of the Holy Spirit then having spiritual experiences should be expected when **we are willing to do what Eli tells Samuel to do.**

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**But let's be clear: There is a risk any time we offer ourselves to God.**

The word Samuel hears from God is **not some spiritual cliché to make him feel good.** Apparently, **God cares about how leaders treat their people—which is to say God cares about politics—so he hears God say:** "On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them."

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 The title of our Diocesan Mission Strategy is "Embracing Brave Change". What would it mean to let God speak into this parish so that we could embrace brave change?

Listening to God would mean you don't want to **be a club filled with the spirit of the age but a church filled with the Spirit of Christ.**

Saint Augustine, one of our greatest theologians, said in the 5<sup>th</sup> century:

**"Without God we cannot; without us, God will not."**

So let us, individually and corporately, pray for spiritually transformative experiences that open our hearts and minds to God.

Do those practices that open you to listen to God: things like deep prayer, Bible reading, working for justice, and serving the common good.

Let us imitate young Samuel and pray daily: **“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”**