

2nd Sunday of Epiphany

Sermon 1.14.18

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

John 1:43-51

He's gathering an army. It's not much of one so far. Just Philip, and then Nathanael. But there they go. "Follow me," he said to them, and they did.

He's gathering an army.

"No," you say. "These are disciples, not soldiers."

"No, he's not gathering an army," you say, "but a school, a discipline, a way."

Fair enough.

I've never been to war. I never entertained joining the military, though my father, who'd been a Naval officer, did once suggest it to me. I never found the study of war all that interesting, something itself I never really noticed until late in high school. A boy graduating in the class ahead of me, and one known to be *smart*, told me he intended to major in War Studies in college. I was astonished there even was such a thing. War seemed not only relatively uninteresting, but moreover too narrow a topic to make a whole college major out of!

Maybe even more surprising is that I've never understood the church in terms of warfare, though I'm a lifelong church-goer and though military imagery has influenced scripture and tradition since the beginning. The apostle Paul, the earliest writer of the Church, indeed the one whose writing was instrumental in *forming* the Church, made use of the martial all over the place. He called fellow Christians "soldiers." He encouraged members of the congregations he formed to "put on the armor of Christ." From there stem many strands of tradition, which reach not least into our own *Pilgrim Hymnal*, the hymnal I grew up with, the hymnal lots of people still profess as their favorite, though many of the hymns frame the life of faith in terms of war. Really, work your way through the section of the hymnal designated "Pilgrimage and Conflict," and the hymns seem to alternate between a mode of peace and a mode of war—indeed, pilgrimage and conflict.

So how did I miss that framing of things?

Of course, you're likely wondering why I bring it up at all because, as you've already said, Jesus isn't here remembered to have been gathering an army. He was gathering disciples, you've rightly pointed out. Slowly, one by one, they're deciding to go with him—and not even based on anything too exciting. There's nothing spectacular going on here to capture their interest. Just this: Jesus saying to Philip when he happened upon him in Galilee, "Follow me," which led to just this: Philip finding Nathanael and saying to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." And who knows what moved Philip to this conclusion about Jesus? Really, given that this gospel narrative, the Gospel of John, is full of signs and wonders, the absence of any such signs and wonders in the call of the disciples is that much more striking, not to mention strange. What drew these two first followers of Jesus to follow Jesus?

"Follow me."

"Come and see."

I've been thinking a lot lately about the things that you invest in whose value you don't know until, years later (surprise!), they've paid off. Things like prayer or therapy, things like a marriage or other lifelong relationship: forty-seven years into life, I see that what I rely on most daily, most urgently, are things I decided on long ago when nothing was known as to how they'd prove their worth—or really whether they would.

I remember one summer when I was in college. I was at the beach with my sister, something we did a lot, living as we did just a couple miles inland along the New Hampshire. (Yes. New Hampshire has a coast.) Some guy came along to chat us up. Having gotten out of us that we were college students, he asked what we were studying.

"English," I told him.

"Is there a lot of money in that?" he asked.

"Well, a lot of speak it," I said, which, as I remember, brought the conversation to a close.

So much of what's promised to pay off for us in life doesn't, whereas so much that our society seems to deem unimportant or not valuable does, or would, in time, in years

perhaps, prove to be both important and valuable. But how do you know when you're young and just starting out and faced with decisions as to what to invest in, where to plant your life? Our society misguides in so many ways, as does youth, let's be honest.

Somehow, Philip thought to follow in a way whose specifics, or even vagaries, Jesus didn't even bother to try touching on. Somehow, too, then Nathanael thought to come and see what Philip had found to follow—to come and see a thing that wouldn't be laid bare to be seen until long into the story.

Really, this phrase, "Come and see," will resound throughout the Gospel of John, beckoning any and all followers onward to the thing that *would* be there to be seen but only plainly so right at the end, right as Jesus is raised on the cross.

It would be a couple of years, then, in the waiting, in the coming in order to see. Yes, there might be some glimpsing, but it would not be fully seeing this truth that the cross of Christ reveals—that God works amidst history and saves all creation through sacrificial love, and that those who wish to participate in God's action should adopt this mode as well, self-giving love. By this, the world will be saved. By such love, the world *is* being saved, *has* been saved. This is what we're to come and see. God is one whose might is love. God is one whose greatest force is self-giving. God is one whose power is most powerfully manifest in service.

But the coming to see will precede the seeing by years.

So how do you know?

A recent essay in the *New York Times Book Review* about the novel as an art form claims that "...writing one is like setting off into a trackless wood. The slightest misreading of your compass can leave you lost in the trees, many miles from where you wanted to go." As with the novel, so with life—which is part of what was so exciting about this novel form in the first place, at the dawn of the Modern Era, in the 16th century. It mimicked life as a long game and therefore revealed life as a long game.

So how do you know?

How did Philip and Nathanael know? Really, what was it that got them to follow in the first place? Luck? Grace? Was it charisma on Jesus' part? The story doesn't think to

tell us, which is, if not surprising, then at least somewhat maddening. I mean, it's likely the writer knew that the readers would have known how the story goes, how it ends, so carrying the reader along in a spirit of plausibility and intelligibility right from the beginning perhaps didn't seem important. This is a gospel narrative, after all, not a novel. But I'd still like to know how Philip and Nathanael knew because I'd moreover like to know how are we to know what's worthy of our following when that worth is, by its nature, not the sort of thing that's immediately obvious.

I suppose it's somewhat a matter of paying attention ever as you go. Few are the decisions that can't be revised or corrected.

This is one reason I hate to preach on this passage. In fact, I'd have to say I never successfully have. Next week, we'll hear Mark's version of Jesus calling his disciples. That one's easier. That one has more urgency. In that one, the cause for following is more clearly spelled out. This one, though: this one feels frustratingly true to life—and I don't mean life with Christ, I just mean life.

Tough as it to preach on, though, it's easy to live with. As a call to follow, as an invitation to come and see, this is, I think, easy to live with. In fact, I think this characterizes our congregation quite well, so much so that we've even thought to put it on a new sign that we have in mind for out front. "Monterey United Church of Christ. All are welcome. *You* are welcome. Come and see."

We're a quiet, steady presence, after all, and we likely won't otherwise attract much attention. In town, in this place, and as regards our charge, we're long-running, steady-going, reliably challenging and dependably comforting and surprisingly serious and slowly going deeper. I'd even say that "Come and see" is the process by which most of newer participants have found themselves among us, increasingly involved, eventually even dedicated. Really, it wears well. It just doesn't preach well. Worse, though, it might betray one essential quality of the gospel—its urgency.

When you frame the church's task in the world as one of warfare, you get to its urgency. When you give voice to what we're about in military terms, you call out the urgent purposefulness that's to motivate us. Steadfast in the face of opposition (the

powers, the principalities, the current administration), each of us and all of us together strong to withstand attack (against the values we hold dear such as humanism, hospitality, and love), clear in our charge and in our aim (that we witness boldly to the works of love, that we resist the pull of hatred and revenge but instead live into the life of God which is the all in all), the work of the gospel in the world and we who mean to do it might indeed benefit from this martial way of formulating being in the world.

People, of course, benefit from a sense of purpose in life, and youth all the more do, along with being entrusted to go about that purpose. What's more, I suspect the younger generations in the Postmodern West especially seek a purpose, as so much of what once gave shape and meaning to life in general, and any given life in particular, seems to have fallen away or been revealed as a false construction. Sensing this dearth, I further suspect much of American evangelicalism, long more comfortable with the Church's charge as one to war, has stepped up that rhetoric—and in some cases, I imagine, it's cynical, numbers-driven, but in some cases, I imagine it's sincere, reveals a sincere sense that the Gospel will not easily find a home in this world, that the Church's mission will not be wholly received, might indeed be downright rejected, were the world really to know what the Church is up to.

I wonder if the mainline church has drained the urgency out of our mission. Out of a desire not to seem too aggressive, out of a reverence at long last of what destruction real war can bring, I wonder if we've been drawn of all our fight.

When I was at divinity school, so was Chris Hedges. A journalist who was an embedded war correspondent for decades, and so covered many wars, Hedges came home, sobered up from the intoxication of war, and enrolled at Harvard Divinity School to earn an M.Div. I didn't know him there, came to know of him only after he graduated and began the next phase of his professional life, as a writer who takes a more intellectually critical approach to war as a phenomenon that has dogged humanity since the beginning of time.

His best-known book I'd say is *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, a book I haven't read and have long meant to. It's full of good quotes. Here's one of them: "The

enduring attraction of war is this: Even with its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living. Only when we are in the midst of conflict does the shallowness and vapidness of much of our lives become apparent. Trivia dominates our conversations and increasingly our airwaves. And war is an enticing elixir. It gives us resolve, a cause. It allows us to be noble. And those who have the least meaning in their lives, the impoverished refugees in Gaza, the disenfranchised North African immigrants in France, even the legions of young who live in the splendid indolence and safety of the industrialized world, are all susceptible to war's appeal."

I lay this alongside books I've read by veterans, and conversations I've had with veterans, one of whom is in this room. From these I've learned that the engagement you experience when you're in the military, most especially when you're in combat, is something so close to truth that it can't be denied, begs to be pursued, and can then easily become deceptive, misleading. That full engagement—of strength and soul, of body and brotherhood (if you will): it's beautiful.

It's beautiful—unless it isn't. And then it can be as ugly as humans get.

The stakes are high—which is itself akin to truth. The stakes *are* high.

For what it's worth, I know something of that sense of full engagement, though with considerably lower stakes. There's a moment in rowing. These months that I'm off the water I miss it perhaps most of all. When you've moved up the slide to the catch, you've squared your oars and are now burying your blades, and the boat stills a bit in the water while the spoons of the oars load with the full weight of water, and you're at full compression just before you hammer down on the drive: then you press your heels into the footboard and your whole core from the back of your thighs to the "lats" on your ribcage against the lake that holds you. There's not a part of the body, or of the mind for that matter, that doesn't play some determinative role.

The resistance that the water presents, the engagement that any success at this will demand: I love it. I can't get enough of it. So I don't wait until I'm on the water. I do it all the time. I do it in church. I do it *because* of church. This resistance that gives

strength, this engagement that proves purpose: it's a sort of struggle, a sort of battle, and our getting it right will have much to do with whether our prayer is realized, that God's kingdom might come and God's will might be done on earth as it is in heaven.

I wonder if we can have it both ways. A battle-ready strength whose urgent mission is peace; a militant purposefulness whose means and end are love such that no kingdom of this world, each and all built on exploitation and deception, could possibly stand; a disciplined engagement of every aspect of ourselves, all for the sake of the least among us who, left alone, wouldn't stand a chance.

I wonder, can we have it both ways? Evangelical zeal and "come and see" steadiness? A fundamental urgency and a "follow me" ease? Disciplined forcefulness and gracious calm? Militant hope and assured faith?

I really don't know.

I *do* know that I couldn't have us sing any number of those hymns sitting quietly in the *Pilgrim Hymnal*. "The Son of God goes forth to war, a kingly crown to gain; His blood-red banner streams afar. Who follows in his train?"

Uh, not me.

And yet.

Uncle Sam stared out from his iconic poster, looking to a whole generation of energized Americans to tell them, "I need you." I'll admit, I more and more feel that on behalf of the Church. This week's ugliness from the West Wing only redoubled my sense of urgency, Jesus standing before us, "Follow me. Come and see. I need you. *We* need you."

The call of Samuel makes note that, one reason why the boy might not have recognized the call of God when it came, mistook it instead as a call from his teacher Eli, is because "the word of the Lord was rare in those days." I'll admit, I more and more feel this to be true today. While prominent religious leaders continue to martial themselves and their congregations to this administration's defense, I more urgently believe that the word of the Lord has been perverted these days, a fact I more forcefully want to address and more urgently need you to do as well.

I hope it's a relief to you to learn how very much you're needed—because you are, though whether as a disciplined soldier in a war we'll surely win, and by the force of love, or as a follower in the Way of peace, come to see the truth of God who is sacrificial love, we'll perhaps puzzle through that together.

Meanwhile, thanks be to God.