

First Impressions
John 1: 43-51
Ann Hatfield

As a young child, I was enchanted when my father read fairytales out loud. “Once upon a time.....” Just these four, simple words – once upon a time – were a captivating invitation. I REALLY wanted to discover what would happen next. Is there a troll lurking under the bridge? Will a dragon swoop down from the sky? And of course – at the end of the story – does everyone live “happily ever after”?

Today we have heard two biblical stories – one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. Thanks to Kathy Smedley’s remarkable gifts, the story of Eli and Samuel has been shared through biblical storytelling.

In this almost comical narrative, young Samuel encounters God for the first time. This happens when the word of the Lord seems rare and visions were not widespread, so Samuel does not know God yet. Three times God calls, “Samuel, Samuel.” Each time, Samuel runs to the elderly priest, assuming Eli is calling his name.

Eventually, after one too many nighttime interruptions, Eli realizes it is God speaking. With insight gleaned from years of experience, Eli instructs Samuel to respond: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” And so, Samuel receives a vision of his future vocation.

In John’s gospel, we learn of another first encounter. Philip, excited at meeting Jesus, enthusiastically tells Nathanael they have found the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth. Nathanael responds, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” After all, Nazareth is a small, insignificant village in Galilee – certainly not an appropriate hometown for the Messiah. Not to be dissuaded, Philip invites Nathanael to come and see. You have to meet Jesus!

During their encounter, Jesus sees who Nathanael is – looks into his heart; knows what he needs. In dramatic response, Nathanael moves from ignorance to knowledge, from skepticism to confession, from doubt to faith. When Nathanael looks beyond his flawed first impression, he sees Jesus for who he truly is: the Son of God.

Before we judge Nathanael too harshly, perhaps you and I should reflect on the assessments we make based on first impressions and with the ingrained prejudice we sometimes harbor. It happens all too often.

Let me share a more recent story:

Politician and voting rights activist Stacey Abrams graduated from high school in 1991, as valedictorian. In Georgia, valedictorians are invited to meet the governor. But Stacey's family was poor, and had no car. So, Stacey and her parents travelled by bus to the governor's mansion to attend this special recognition. Arriving at the imposing gates in front of the governor's mansion, the Abrams family got off the bus, and walked across the street. With her invitation in hand, Stacey presented herself to the guard. The guard looked at Stacey, looked at her parents, and said, "YOU don't belong here. This is a private event."

Stacey's father proudly stated, "This is my daughter, Stacey. She is her high school's valedictorian." Instead of consulting the invitation list in his hand, the guard looked at the departing bus. In his mind, the BUS told the story about who should – and who should NOT – meet the governor.

Perhaps Stacey's dark skin color prompted the guard to reiterate disdainfully, "I told you. This is a PRIVATE event. You don't BELONG here." Only after strong words from her parents, did the guard consult the invitation list, and discover Stacey's name.

As Stacey recounts this story, she remembers very little about seeing the governor or meeting the other valedictorians. The only clear memory she has of that day is of a man standing in front of the most powerful place in Georgia, looking at her, and telling her she did NOT belong.¹ However, Stacey did receive a vision of her future vocation.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Can a poor, Black girl be valedictorian?

The disheartening reality is all too often we not only think – but also ACT upon – flawed and dismissive beliefs about others. The good news is God continues to speak to us in ways that are transformational. We may be slow, doubtful, and hard of hearing at times, but God keeps speaking.

As we read stories from the Bible, we hear the ongoing conversations of God with God's people. We belong to God as beloved children. Like Samuel and Nathanael, God will not leave us as we ARE. On the contrary, God promises to call and shepherd us into who we can BECOME.

While God communicates with Samuel in nighttime utterances, God comes to the early disciples in the ACTUAL PERSON of Jesus – in Jesus, God's Word took on flesh, and moved into the neighborhood. Jesus Christ is God's creative, life-giving Word, calling us beyond our first impressions to come and see. Come and see! Follow Jesus Christ, and see God's mighty acts in and for the world.

God is not finished telling God's story. And thankfully, our stories are intricately woven into God's story. So, we may ask, "Can anything good come out of the recent racial unrest, political turmoil, global pandemic, and economic crisis?" But we also TRUST in God's ability to restore, renew, and resurrect.

Be assured and take heart, because there is no circumstance, time, place, or situation beyond God's ability to transform and redeem.² Nothing – NOTHING – will defeat God's determination to be WITH US and FOR US.

Once upon a time, not so long ago, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. shared a vision: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."³

Tomorrow we celebrate the legacy of Rev. King. May it be an invitation to you and me to honor King's dream by HOW we live our stories. With hope and great expectancy, may we seek to participate in God's larger, salvation story in ways that more fully establish justice, peace, and freedom for all. "Speak, Lord, for your servants ARE listening."

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Stacey Abrams, "3 questions to Ask Yourself About Everything You Do," TED Talks, <http://www.ted.com/talks>.

² Debie Thomas, "What Do You See?" <http://www.journeywithjesus.net>, posted January 10, 2021.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," Washington, DC, August 28, 1963.