

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.

In her book *Seeking God, The Way of St. Benedict*, author Esther de Waal writes about the deep truth at the center of The Rule of St. Benedict and Benedictine spirituality: trust that **God is not elsewhere**.

God is not somewhere waiting for us to arrive: the next step up the career ladder; when we lose 10 pounds; when we become better parents; when we get through this time of crisis.

God is not elsewhere, because God is always present with us.

This truth is expressed in Latin phrase *vocatus atque non vocatus, Deus aderit*, which is translated **bidden or unbidden, God is present**.

Found among the Latin jottings of Renaissance scholar Erasmus, the quote was popularized in its English translation by psychologist Carl Jung, who had it inscribed both over the front door of his home, and later, on his tombstone.

God is not elsewhere ~ bidden or unbidden, God is present.

Two sides of the same coin, and two statements of belief that weave today's readings from 1 Samuel, the Psalms, and John's gospel into something *more* than any of them are by themselves, teaching us about listening, knowing, and encountering God.

God is not elsewhere ~ bidden or unbidden, God is present.

The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

This observation sets the stage for the beginning of a shift of power for the people of Israel, one which will ultimately lead to the line of kings – for it will be Samuel who anoints first Saul, and then in time, David.

But today we are at the beginning of one of the great stories of the Bible, a story full of irony and amusement, when the boy Samuel first encounters the Lord.

Now, the irony comes from the fact that God's voice was apparently unexpected in the Temple, of all places, and the amusement comes from the play on words that is only evident in Hebrew. I'll do my best to untangle it for you:

Now Lord called, "Sam-u-el, Sam-u-el," which means "God has heard."

And Samuel responded, "Here I am!" and ran to the priest named Eli, whose name means "my God."

So "God has heard" hears God, thinking it is "My God" speaking instead of the true God.

Three times we see this happen. It is only after God speaks repeatedly, that Eli's wisdom awakens and he realizes what is happening. He then instructs Samuel that when God calls him *again* he should answer, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

That is what Samuel does, because God did call to him again – God is always calling.

In the stillness of the night, with darkness encroaching, though the lamp of God had not yet gone out, God was finally heard.

We don't always recognize it, often we don't hear, let alone truly listen – but God is always present and always ready for conversation, calling us into a new thing.

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O God, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar.

No matter the translation – *NRSV*, *Book of Common Prayer*, or even *The Runaway Bunny* – the intensity and intimacy of this scripture passage is awesome.

More than one writer has called Psalm 139 a creation psalm. Not one about the vast mysteries of the heavens and earth, or even the marvelous workings of nature around us. No, this creation is God's own ongoing work in bringing us to fullness of life, the unwrapping of the mystery of each of us as unique individuals,¹ as children of God.

¹ Kathryn Matthews Huey, ucc.org: Sermon Seeds.

To me, this psalm feels like a warm embrace, bringing comfort and giving strength. The words express an intimate knowledge and involvement of God in our lives.

Here, names are not even necessary. Almost every verse contains pronouns referring to both the psalmist (I/me/my) and to God (you/your). They are intertwined in such a way that God is the very context of the psalmist's life, and indeed ours as well.²

And yet there is an edge to it that is nearly overwhelming – we are *fully* known, there is not a word on our lips that God does not know; God is *always* present, pressing upon us from behind and before – there is nowhere we can go to escape God.

As the psalmist writes in the middle verses 6-11, which were omitted from what we read today –

Where can I go then from your Spirit; where can I flee from your presence?

*If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there
also.*

*If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there your hand will lead me, and your right hand hold me fast.*

*If I say, "Surely the darkness will cover me, and the light around me turn to night,"
Darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day; darkness and light
to you are both alike.*

² *Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 1; page 249.*

Yes, psalm 139 speaks of the One who created us, who knows us fully and loves us unceasingly, but it also reminds us of the easy to overlook and powerful truth – that God is always with us, in all that we do, and wherever we go.

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Follow me. Come and see.

In this short season of Ordinary days between the Epiphany and the start of Lent, we explore the manifestation of Jesus – stories that began with his baptism last week and now lead us into a deeper knowledge of **who** he was and **how** he was among us.

Today we hear the gospel of John’s version of Jesus calling the disciples. It began in verse 35, with the calling of Andrew and Simon Peter, and now continues with the story of Philip and Nathanael.

As far as action goes there isn’t a lot here. Jesus found Philip and said to him “Follow me.” And that was somehow enough. It was enough for him to go to his friend Nathanael, tell him about Jesus, and say, “Come and see.”

Now Nathanael was skeptical, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” But when he saw Jesus, and Jesus knew him upon sight, Nathanael too believed and proclaimed Jesus the Son of God, the King of Israel.

What led these men to make such a radical decision to *come and see* and then *follow*? We read of no miracle or sign that Jesus performed, nor any teaching. In this account it seems to be enough that they encountered Jesus, even if they weren't expecting it.

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Each of these stories about listening, knowing, and encountering God teaches us fundamental things:

Even when confronted by the divine, it is possible for us to be oblivious to God's presence in our lives.³

We may 'know' that God is always present, but sometimes it takes a few times before we catch on and pay attention.

We need to say and pray, "Speak, for your servant is listening" a lot more often.

The thoughts of God are greater in number than the grains of sand – and we are always a part of them.

God is waiting for us in ordinary encounters, so we need to pay attention for opportunities to come and see, and then to follow.

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³ *Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 1*; page 261.

These two spiritual truths offer us a way to live our lives. They remind us that throughout it all – the daily-ness, the celebrations, and the heartaches – we are always in the middle of a conversation with God, invited to listen, knowing we are loved, and called to join the great journey with Christ. Amen.