

Epiphany 2B, January 15, 2012

Lections: 1 Sam.3:1-20; Ps. 139:1-6,13-18; 1 Corin. 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

I spent some time at the bookstore at St. Paul University this past week, hoping to find a good selection of books for you to read in Lent or really at any time. Epiphany is also a good season for insight. I look for books that tell the truth about our lives, our faith, the stories of others that might move us to go beyond ourselves. I would like to think I helped you keep a New Year's resolution to take your faith a little deeper, or more seriously, or into the next level of community. One of the books it was easy to pick up: Flunking Sainthood by Jana Riess.

“The project originated in a lighthearted effort to read spiritual classics while attempting a year of faith related disciplines like fasting, Sabbath keeping, fixed hour prayers, and the Jesus prayer. . . .it culminated in a year end meeting with my editor in which I tried to steel her for the fact that I had fallen short in every spiritual practice I had tried.”¹ The book that emerges is one that is encouraging in the midst of failure; it is about being human, about spiritual practicing, about meeting limitations head on and it is about humility, humor and a desire to get it right.

We have some characters in our biblical narrative today who are or would be at home with Jana and with us. Last week Hilary spoke in her sermon about God's inbreaking in our lives; ask her about how that happened for her or how she imagines the form that might take in your life as you try on a new faith behavior or learn more about your practice. The life of the spirit is one lived for others. Invest your self beyond yourself as well if you want to learn some really spiritual lessons but “perfect is the enemy of good. A failed saint is still a saint.”²

From the Hebrew text this morning we have Eli and Samuel's encounter with God. It could be about any of us with heavy wax in our ears, with a clear sense that we tried but couldn't raise perfectly spiritual children, with a sense of fear that God might actually be trying to get our attention which is often stuck on the wrong things. One spiritual practice we might try before we think we are superior to the old priest Eli or the young child Samuel is to notice our own lack of expectation for God to break into our lives. . . .the scripture says that the culture had given up. Perhaps they thought they had failed at this faith thing.

Eli wants to hear God's message however hard the news. Samuel will have sons that are no less scoundrels than Eli's boys. In these characters there is failure and regret, inexperience and openness, a sturdy willingness to listen. Both the patterns of faith handed down, and those handed over by those engaged in religious practices in religious houses might still be life giving

¹ Riess, Jana, *Flunking Sainthood* Paraclete Press, 2011, p.ix.

² *Ibid*, p.171

Jesus' appearance indicates that God has plans to do some good things in ordinary people. I mean not just in Philip and Nathaniel but in Jesus himself, the home boy from the small town. I am continually struck with the posture that Jesus assumes. He is not arguing or persuading or proving. He makes a clear statement and people are free to join him or not. He repeatedly took a position. He was not neutral, nor did he poll the delegation. He treated everyone with dignity. He is not hierarchical. He did not talk down to the leper or the demoniac or those who sought and needed healing. He could quickly ascertain the essence of an issue and hold the contradiction of a situation in tension. His convictions, wisdom, courage, visions, actions will unfold and invite a response from those he meets.

Does God have a plan for us? Is anyone signing up for the "frequent righteousness miles" any more? There is no going it alone, apparently. A community is required, one that is willing to move out of routine and what is already known. Even recognition about what is in front of us, a bunch of labels about Jesus, is a challenge to allow this season of Epiphany to be a process that opens the heavens for us. We are looking for clarity, for an attended process that makes our faith fuller, even if we might flunk sainthood.

In a few minutes after we have been given food for our journey you will vote on the priorities of the parish based on its character. If there are "shoulds" in your visioning – more classes, more services, more outreach – what are you willing to undertake for your own faithfulness? Do you believe that the word of the Lord is rarely heard? Is the church like Nazareth, a backwater not in touch with a sophisticated world which ignores Jesus' invitation to come and follow? What discipline might you choose? What might choose you?

"How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."³

Amen. The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera

³ Anne Frank