

"An Encounter with God"

Second Sunday after Epiphany – Lectionary 2
8:30 and 10:45 a.m. Sunday, January 15, 2012
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

I Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; John 1:43-51

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The British-American author and journalist Christopher Hitchens died December 15 of esophageal cancer. He was a brilliant man whose words about politics and culture cut straight to the core of those subjects. Hitchens displayed a keen sense of observation and a biting wit—though perhaps you wouldn't want to be the recipient of either. I often saw him on political talk shows over the years, and found him to be insightful and brutally honest.

What I didn't realize until three years ago or so was that Christopher Hitchens was an atheist, and vocal about it. He denied the existence of God, and berated those who believed in God. Once receiving his cancer prognosis, he dismissed any notion that he would have a deathbed conversion. A famous quote of Hitchens regarding religion is this, from his book *Hitch 22*: "Faith is the surrender of the mind; it's the surrender of reason...It's our need to believe, and to surrender our skepticism and our reason, our yearning to discard that and put all our trust or faith in someone or something, that is the sinister thing to me."

Learning that Hitchens was an avowed atheist explained a lot to me about his worldview. He was thoroughly cynical and skeptical.

Now let me show you a video about Alyssa. She's nobody famous—simply a young girl who is insightful and honest, just like Christopher Hitchens. The difference is that she is neither cynical about life nor skeptical about God.

(Note to readers: A video is being shown about a teenager named Alyssa. Alyssa has been blind from birth. She talks about coming to terms with that disability, and also how she has grown in faith in the midst of her blindness. She loves her Lord, and knows that the first face she will see in heaven will be the face of Jesus.) Now let's consider Nathanael in our Gospel lesson. He's nobody famous—simply an Israelite, a Jewish man who was insightful and honest, just like Christopher Hitchens. And just like Hitchens, cynical and skeptical. When Philip informs him about Jesus of Nazareth—that he is the holy one of whom the prophets of old have spoken, Nathanael pretty much says, "Yeah, right. And next you'll say you have a bridge over the Jordan River to sell me..."

Nathanael's response is skepticism about Jesus and cynicism about life as he knows it. Nathanael says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nathanael doubts

that God is active and present. Philip's words ring hollow to him. Whatever has happened in Nathanael's life has created a worldview where he cannot accept God actually coming to his world—not in some nobody from a town full of nobodies. Whatever has happened in Nathanael's life up to this point has rendered him closed to the possibility of an encounter with God.

Even the boy Samuel in our first lesson today, while way too young to be cynical about life or skeptical about God, has been born at a time, as our lesson begins, when "the word of the LORD was rare...visions were not widespread." Samuel is growing up as a priest-apprentice at a time when the sense of God's presence and work in the world wasn't strong or overt. People weren't expecting or open to the possibility of a relationship with God, of God calling them and guiding them daily. They were doing their own thing, with God more at the periphery of their lives, somewhat compartmentalized.

What about **our** worldview? I know for me some days it's hard to see where God is present and active. It's not my nature to be cynical or skeptical, but I do have my issues: I get caught up in the distractions and worries and lists of things to do each day. My senses are flooded with the noise around me—e-mails, phone calls, news and entertainment 24/7, the needs of family and parish. Sometimes I'm too **busy** to notice God at work. And when I finally slow down, I end up dozing off in my La-Z-Boy, then haul myself off to bed, shutting out the noise until I wake up way too early to begin another day. Maybe that sounds a little like you, too.

Or maybe you find you **are** getting a bit cynical. Who could blame you, when the world's woes come at you in high definition and overwhelm you? Or maybe you find you **are** getting a bit skeptical. Who could blame you, when the Church, the Bible, religion seem almost irrelevant to the day's concerns, and incapable of altering our human trajectory. Maybe it's just we aren't as honest as Christopher Hitchens was, and are afraid to voice any doubt, any fear, any loss of hope because we worry how it would look, that others wouldn't understand. My guess is some of us here **have** struggled in our faith.

It may well be that whatever has happened in our lives, or whatever happens from one day to the next, renders us closed to the possibility of an encounter with God. Or at least closed to recognizing an encounter has occurred. But both our Bible stories today—these stories about Nathanael and Samuel—remind us that, contrary to human public opinion, God is alive and well and active. On our behalf, and on the world's behalf. It's apparently **our** issue that we don't notice God or listen to God.

Perhaps it's not possible to have our worldview changed in a moment's notice. Each of us carries burdens and heartaches, each of us juggles the stresses of daily living, each of us has things about our lives that aren't easily resolved—they are what they are. And we have to live through them.

But even if it's not possible to change our worldview and be less cynical and skeptical, there are ways, I believe, that we become more open to God's activity,

more aware of his presence. And maybe if we become more open, we'll discover our God is ever at work renewing creation, healing hearts, giving life. And that discovery **will** make us less cynical, less skeptical, and once again more open to join God in that work.

It is ironic that Alyssa, the young blind woman in our video, finds her blindness to be the very thing that has opened her up to know and believe in God. Forced in her blindness to rely on and trust others, she has learned to rely on and trust God. Alyssa says that's why her faith is strong. Compare that to Christopher Hitchens, who thought it a sinister thing to put all our trust in someone. Alyssa was open to God by the nature of her disability.

But obviously that's not **our** answer for how to be more open to God. So consider Samuel and Nathanael once more. Both had their eyesight, though both—at first—did not recognize God in their midst. What's important to note in both their cases is that God kept reaching out to them. Samuel thinks the old priest Eli is calling him in the night because he couldn't imagine that God might be calling him. But God is persistent. God knows Samuel, and continues to call Samuel, until at last Samuel recognizes God is there—right there—and Samuel calls back that he is ready to listen.

And Nathanael: While he doesn't put much credence in what Philip has to tell him about this Jesus of Nazareth, this Jesus of Nazareth himself comes up to Nathanael, making clear he knows Nathanael very well, knows Nathanael is honest and without deceit. Then Nathanael, seeing how this man really knows him, realizes he is in the presence of God. God's persistence, through Jesus, washes away the cynicism, the skepticism. Nathanael rises to follow Jesus.

Our God who loves this world and each person in it will not stop, but finds ways again and again to make himself known, to establish an encounter with us where we will at last recognize God's presence and power. One of those ways is through worship. Here in this gathering is where God promises to be present. Here in this gathering is an opportunity to let our distractions and worries and to-do lists, our cynical or skeptical natures, take a back seat long enough for us to be open to God.

Actually, Christians for centuries have been using all kinds of spiritual practices to help them be open to God's activity. I just read Jana Riess' book *Flunking Sainthood*, a story of how she spent a year delving into various Christian practices. Jana tackled a different practice each month: fasting, fixed-hour prayer, Sabbath-keeping, daily scripture reading, gratitude, and hospitality, to name a few. She had trouble doing them perfectly or regularly. Some months she grew despondent, feeling like a failure when she faltered in those practices. But near the end of her year of taking on these spiritual practices, Jana realized she had become more open to God's presence, and his ongoing work in her. In fact, she shares at the end of her memoir how these spiritual practices opened her up to forgiving her estranged father and reconciling with him a few days before his death. She writes these words after that event: "I may have spent a year flunking sainthood, but along the way I've had unexpected epiphanies and wild glimpses of the holy I would never have

experienced without these crazy practices.” Cynicism about her relationship with her father, and skepticism about her spirituality were washed away.

From long-ago folks like Samuel and Nathanael to present-day witnesses like Alyssa and Jana, you and I are assured that God’s word is **not** rare in these times. God and his unlimited love can be seen, heard, experienced every day, and often in surprising ways. God continues to call you and me; God will not stop doing so. Be open to the possibility, and ready to listen.

AMEN.

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