

Epiphany 2-B  
January 13-14, 2018  
St. John's Cathedral

You might remember a book that was a best-seller in the 1990s called *Conversations With God*. I have to confess that I never read the book, but I've always loved the title.

It reminds me that we all have conversations with God -- all the time. But most of the time we don't recognize them for what they are. In a way our worship today is a conversation with God – although it probably seems like we're monopolizing the conversation. But there is a listening side to worship – a kind of listening that comes as we hear scripture and as we are attentive to those connections that arise out of what is happening in our worship. It is letting God speak to us.

Of course we also have our daily times of prayer – of both talking and listening. There are those middle of the night moments when we have unexpected conversations with God. Times of trial and crisis; times of awe and surprise. Holy moments of every variety.

Theologian William Willimon says we all have those conversations with God, but adds that our questions to God are not nearly so interesting as God's questions to us. Interesting because they usually wake us up. They call us out of our stupor – our of our inattentiveness – and into a new place, a new challenge, a new insight.

I once had a very quick conversation with God as I sat in an upscale coffee shop in Phoenix. I sat at a table by the window, sipping my Earl Grey tea and admiring the stunning art on the wall while a steady stream of homeless people walked by. A couple

with all of their belongings in two beat-up shopping carts. A man with a tattered bedroll who stopped momentarily to rub the bark off the tree in front of the restaurant. A man in a wheelchair whose lap was piled high with his “stuff” -- all stowed in plastic shopping bags.

I think God’s side of the conversation was something like, “Hey – are you looking out the window? Did you see the guy in the wheelchair? Does this touch your heart?” My side of the conversation was, “Yeah, I saw him. And yeah, it did touch my heart. But could I please finish my tea? I promise I’ll remember all of them.” (And I guess I did.)

Today’s readings open up for us some interesting conversations with God that say something about God and something about us, too.

The psalm ( my very favorite one for beginning a time of retreat), reminds us that we are never alone. God knows our sitting down and rising up – discerns our thoughts from afar – has known us from before our birth because God created us.

There is a deep connection that we have with God. An intimacy that is unlike any other intimacy. God is with us in the coffee shop as intensely as in the church. God is with us in the place of pain as well as the place of joy. Somehow we are connected in ways that defy words and often our conversations with God don’t even need them.

The reading from First Samuel, (the call of Samuel to be a prophet) and the gospel reading (the call of disciples), are conversations of a different type. They truly are stories of call and commissioning.

Samuel was just a little boy when he heard someone calling him as he lay in the temple at night, and assumed it was the old temple priest, Eli. Samuel kept hearing that

voice and running to Eli. After three times, Eli realized that the voice was really God's voice. God was calling the boy, Samuel. The next time Samuel heard the voice, he responded by saying to God, "Speak, for your servant is listening." After that he received a vision -- a challenging vision that called Samuel to deliver a difficult prophecy. Samuel said "yes" to God's call and became a bold prophet -- a servant of the Lord.

In the gospel reading from John, Jesus says to Philip, "Follow me." And Philip brings Nathanael along as well. They are called to be followers of Jesus -- hearing his voice and entering into a new relationship, a new vocation.

Vocational stories always seem to be dramatic in scripture, and well they should because they emerge out of conversations with God. God spoke to Moses, recruiting him to lead the Hebrew people out of their captivity in Egypt. God called prophets -- Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and others -- to that challenging ministry of proclaiming the truth for God. The angel, God's messenger, announced to Mary that her vocational call was to give birth to God's son, Jesus.

Of ten there is a "Who, me?" quality to those stories. None of these folks seems to feel up to the task at hand. Surely there must be someone else out there who would do a better job. Sometimes these people are awestruck. Sometimes they're just plain scared. But one way or another, they all say yes. One way or another they follow through.

It is this God who knows us so well -- to the very depths of our being -- this God who knows our sitting down and our rising up. This God who discerns our thoughts from afar. It is this God who asks us to do things and to be things that we are gifted to do, even if we aren't aware of those gifts.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, writing on vocation, says that for these biblical giants and for the rest of us whose lives and ministries seem much more ordinary, there is a call to vocation that reveals who we really are – even if we haven't realized it yet.

God, he says, does not create us as a “pool of cheap labor to whom jobs can be assigned at will.” Instead, we are called to respond to God by being uniquely who we are. God doesn't arbitrarily drop vocations on to us, pushing us like square pegs into round holes. We have some aptitude deep within us, sometimes recognized by others, but always recognized by God.

But sometimes we're genuinely surprised by these vocational twists and turns. Back in the late 1960s when I was working as a newspaper reporter I would have been astonished to think that today I would be serving in this cathedral after 32 years as a priest. I really did like newspaper work. But I like what I do now even better. God had something else in mind for me – and we had some very interesting conversations about it over the years as that call to ministry started to percolate.

Those conversations with God – those vocational calls – are something we all know at some level. God says, “I have something I'd like you to do.” And we have the choice to respond out of our giftedness.

I'm aware of how so many in this congregation have said “yes” to God's call in some way. It might be living the vocation of parent or grandparent where the gifts of wisdom and patience and love all work together to shape a life. It might be in the vocation of compassion, feeding the hungry; visiting the sick; seeking out the lonely; helping to build a house for someone who doesn't have one. It might be in that prophetic

edge that speaks out for justice -- a vocation we remember and celebrate this weekend in the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. Or the gift of servanthood that discovers a need and quietly addresses it. Or it could be one of hundreds of other things. A call to serve God that is uniquely yours – called forth and shaped by those conversations with God and our life in this faith community.

It has been said that our vocation is where our gifts and passion meet the world's great need. Not square pegs in round holes, but people who are called forth and equipped by the God who created us. The God who calls us and challenges us to live and to serve out of that place that is uniquely ours.