

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF SHOWING UP

Second Sunday of Epiphany
John 1:43-51; 1 Samuel 3:1-10

How many times has someone run up to you,
their face bursting with excitement,
eyes wide,
voice at a high pitch,
mouth running a mile-a-minute,
trying to tell about something amazing or scary or funny
that recently happened.

And somehow your own face doesn't mirror theirs.
They see your blank look, that you are underwhelmed,
and they say, "*You had to be there!*"

It sounds like a cliché, but it really *is* true.
There is no good substitute for "being there."
You can only get the full impact of something
if you're right there where it's happening.
If you see it.
If you show up and participate in it.

Telling someone something that another someone saw
at some other time,
and some other place,
is . . . well . . . just a little short of exciting.

TV news programs have figured out
they attract more interest,
and sound more believable,
if they call their program "Eye-witness news."
They bring the eye of the camera to you.
You can see it, so you can believe it!

That's essentially the message of today's Gospel reading.

Philip tried, although unsuccessfully,
to convey to Nathaniel the excitement of his new discovery.

He ran up to Nathaniel and breathlessly blurted out,
"We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law!
This is the one we've been waiting for!
The Messiah!
The one the prophets wrote about!
We've *found* him.

Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."
Nathaniel's face was blank with disinterest.
"Nazareth? Right!"
So Philip said, simply, "Come and see."
Come and see.

And Nathaniel *did* come. And he *did* see.
And after a few brief words with Jesus,
he was convinced.
"Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."

Coming and seeing made *all* the difference,
for Nathaniel's journey to faith.

Surely it's the same for you and me.
If we want to grow in faith,
we find out where God is at work,
and we show up.
To see.
To be present.
To pay attention.
To be responsive.

It's a spiritual discipline, I would argue,
simply to show up.
To make the effort to be there.

21st-century American society does *not* really encourage
this spiritual discipline.

It doesn't encourage us to be
actively present,
and deliberately attentive,
and thoughtfully responsive to what is going on around us.

Technology allows us to accomplish more and more tasks,
with less and less effort and input on our part.

We don't really *need* to pay attention anymore,
in order to survive.

Our food is prepared and packaged,
sealed and shelved,
bought and consumed,
without us ever having to know, or even *think* about,
where it grew, or who worked the harvest,
or how far it traveled to get to my table.

We don't have to dig for the news.
It comes to us instantly in email alerts and digital feeds,
and text messages,
Sometimes we have to get it the old-fashioned way—television.
And newspapers . . . are like dinosaurs anymore.

When we travel,
we don't pull out a big map to get the lay of the land,
or learn anything about the area we're passing through.
We type an address into the GPS,
and off we go,
doing whatever the computerized voice tells us to.

Bills are paid with a click of the mouse, or not even *that*.
They're just paid automatically,
because we told our bank's computers to do it for us.

We don't really need
to walk up to a human behind a counter
and smile, or talk about the weather.

We even catch up with our friends without effort,
by reading their Facebook status online,
and typing in a witty comment on our keyboard.

Many of us have neighbors within a stone's throw,

who we don't even know,
for the simple reason that we don't *have* to know them
to be a good neighbor in that neighborhood.
Because good neighbors are defined as
neighbors who don't impose themselves on other neighbors.
Everything we need for life,
we have inside our home, or fenced-in yard,
or two minutes away at the store.

I'm not judging others here, I'm talking about myself.
I get news alerts in my email,
travel with a GPS,
do automatic bill pay,
keep up with people on Facebook,
and can't remember the last time I asked a neighbor
for anything more sacrificial
than picking up our newspaper while we're gone.

I'm not advocating dumping all our technological advances
that streamline the activities of life.
I'm suggesting we need to be more aware
of what we have lost in the process,
and find some ways to recover the practice of attentiveness,
of openness,
of hospitality.

Because nearly all the routine tasks of daily life,
can be done without paying attention.
Without putting forth much human effort,
without making conscious decisions,
without creating direct human connections,
without considering our natural environment.

The life that most of our society considers normal today,
is a life that encourages being passive.

Our living room probably has a half dozen remotes lying around.
With the touch of a button I can switch to
another song on the CD,

another chapter in the movie,
another station on the radio,
another channel on the TV.

I adjust the mood of the moment with the volume button.

You know, a remote control could be a good metaphor
for the passive lives many of us live today.

We live our lives remotely.

We control things, while keeping a safe distance,
remote and removed from any real, participatory,
transforming interaction on our part.

We surf the available channels of life until
the channel that pleases us the most,
and demands the least comes on the screen.

And we sit back and enjoy.

But a life of following Jesus is not like that at all . . .
not even . . . remotely.

The invitation of Jesus is to “come and see.”

To put down the remote,
and deliberately show up *where* the action is.

To be prepared to participate in that action.

To be fully present and fully attentive.

To show up is not as easy as it sounds.

It’s not just putting in time.

It’s choosing to be where you need to be
in order to live the life you were made for.

The God of the Bible is greatly pleased
when people have the guts to show up when they’re called,
and say, “Your servant, Lord. Reporting for duty.”

The boy Samuel showed up.

Time after time, when he heard someone calling his name.

It took a little while to sort out the reality of *who* was calling him.

But Samuel spoke words of faith,
words God is *always* wanting to hear from us.

“Here I am.”

Here I *am*.

It wasn’t necessary that young Samuel, at that tender age,
grasped the full reality of what God was up to in Israel.

It was only necessary that he was willing to show up,
to be available,
to be attentive.

It was only necessary that he could say, and mean it,
“Here I am. Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”

On the one hand,
what’s being asked of us in incredibly simple.

This is *God’s* work. *God’s* responsibility.

God’s mission that we are about.

All *we* are being asked to do is show up, and listen.

Pay attention.

On the *other* hand,

what we are being asked to do is risky and counter-cultural.

Saying “Here I am” to God, is not *really* the safe choice.

It’s the *right* choice.

It’s the choice that leads to *life*.

But it’s not the *safe* choice.

The safe choice is living life by remote control.

Pushing buttons, and keeping your distance.

When little boy Samuel said, “Here I am,” to God,
God immediately gave him a burden heavy to bear,
a message of judgment to deliver to his hero and mentor, Eli.

God said to this youngster, and I quote,

“See, I am about to do something in Israel
that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.
I will punish Eli and his family . . . forever.”

When Philip said to Nathaniel, come and see,
and he went and saw,
Nathaniel was not making the safe choice.

And I think he realized that, *while* he was making it.
He didn't fully understand at the time *why*
that choice would be so dangerous,
but he *knew*.
In the era of oppression by the Roman Empire,
declaring Jesus to be the "Son of God,"
was putting his life at risk.
That exact title, "*Son of God*,"
was a title claimed by, and exclusively reserved for,
Caesar, the Roman Emperor.
Nathaniel not only named a minor Jewish rabbi "Son of God,"
but called him, "the King of Israel."
Those words were in no way words of pious spirituality.
They were a statement of Nathaniel's political loyalty.
Nathaniel was saying to Jesus, and saying to his people and to God,
"Here I am."
I have come. I have seen.
I recognize that this is the work of God happening here.
And now I am ready to join whatever is about to happen next.
Little did he know.
But he came, he saw, he enlisted.

In this confused and broken and sinful world we live in today,
especially when so much of it is brought right into our living room,
the easy option is to pick up the remote control,
and push "Mute."
And sit back down, keeping a safe distance.

Jesus says, "Come and see."
Come to where I'm at work, see what I'm up to.
If today Jesus is *still* all about
preaching good news to the poor,
and recovering sight to the blind,
and binding up the broken-hearted,
and letting the captive go free,
then guess where Jesus might be *today*.

Jesus is a homeless man,

walking the streets of Harrisonburg in zero degrees,
and hoping someone will take him in, and feed him,
and give him a place to rest,
even if only from 7pm to 7am.

Will we come and see, or will we look for the "mute" button?

Jesus is working night shift in the poultry plant,
and sending money back to his family in El Salvador.
Jesus is a frail, shriveled, woman in a local nursing home,
whose family has all but forgotten her.
Jesus is a prisoner at Guantanamo.
Jesus is the head of a household in Gaza City,
who lost two of his children in the bombing last week.

We can come and see, or we can push "mute."

Not only is Jesus *represented* by those
"least of our brothers and sisters" (check out Matt. 25).
God is also actively present and at work
to save, redeem, restore, and reconcile
wherever there is sin, and injustice, and oppression, and war.
God is uniquely and powerfully at work,
and inviting us to join.
To come and see.
To be deliberately present.
To get in the way.
To stick our nose in, where it belongs.
To engage in the difficult, and potentially costly,
but supremely life-giving and joy-producing,
spiritual discipline of showing up.
Of putting down the remote,
and walking toward the life God has in mind for us.

John Bell wrote a profound and thought-provoking poem
about putting down the remote.
We're going to sing it in a minute,
but don't take out your songbook yet.

Listen to the words first.
They preach my sermon better than I can.

The first four stanzas are the words of Jesus,
asking us to come, see, participate.
The final stanza is our response.

Listen.

*Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown? Will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?*

*Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?*

*Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean and do such as this unseen,
and admit to what I mean in you and you in me?*

*Will you love the "you" you hide if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around,
through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?*

*Lord . . . your summons echoes true when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.
In Your company I'll go where Your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.*

[words by John L. Bell & Graham Maule]

—Philip L. Kniss, January 18, 2009