

Kate celebrates the symbols of our faith in this message she shared with the congregation and with the Convocation of the Bangor Theological Seminary this past January 9th. It is based on 1 Samuel 3:1-10, Psalm 139, and John 1:43-51.

As many of you know, Joel and I were asked to lead the opening worship at the Bangor Theological Seminary this past Monday. The request confused us a little. The theme of the Convocation and the week's speakers was "emergent church" which often means new and exciting ways of worship, often with done with enhanced technology, music, and images taken from today's evolving culture. We were going to say no. When I called the seminary president back, I asked him why he wanted us, as our worship style is fairly traditional. In the course of that conversation, my heart started to engage, and a voice seemed to come up from a deeper self, and it said "*Kate, trust the symbols...trust the symbols and let them speak.*" When I hung up, Joel said, "What just happened?"

What had happened was my desire to stand up for the symbols, the ancient treasures of the Christian tradition that call us deeper and deeper into the mystery of God. As I tell my seminary students, "True symbols enact what they signify." In other words, they make real and present what it is they are pointing toward. Our symbols are words, actions, events, vessels of incarnation – the being of God revealed in the earthly, material, flesh and blood, here and now. They shimmer with the presence of Spirit...or, at least, they can...when they are **trusted**.

So...trusting the symbols, we went first to scripture, to the lectionary of this coming week, knowing whatever was there would serve us well. Here we found old friends, all encountering something new for the first time – Samuel and Eli, Philip and Nathanael – the child in need of the elder's guidance, the elder about to be taught by the child, the bearer of good news anxious to share it with his friend, and the beloved cynic.

I recognized them...they **all live** in our congregation! I remember a young Samuel seeking me out one day with tears shining in his eyes asking "Is God real?" And I admire the Elis who come to our weekly parsonage communion because they "want to hear what the young folks

are saying." Then there's the Philip who brings in his college friends from school, an hour away. And Nathanael – we definitely have a few Nathanaels, honestly circumspect about whether church is worth doing at all. One comes every Sunday, a self-proclaimed atheist, who regularly tells me "You haven't gotten me yet!" The other, one of the most kind, generous and involved of our congregation, has "little use for Christianity." I love our vigilant Nathanaels, and I suspect there may one or two among us this morning, wondering "Can anything good come out of this battered, tired, **oh so steeped in yesterday**, church?"

The scripture text can act as sacrament, the sacred Word coming alive in the flesh and blood of the gathered assembly. The assembly comes alive as we enter the story – but only if we trust its symbolic power. In the process of communal dialogue, whether by means of proclamation, sermon, and reflection, or the practice of *lectio divina*, in which we are encouraged to hear a word addressed directly to us, or...and here **you** can fill in the blank, for there are multiple ways to engage the scripture, to discover there the Word, the presence of Christ fully embodied and acting among us. One of my favorites is when my character husband takes on the character of someone in the text, and bursts into this sanctuary where anything can happen...Nathanael would have loved to show up today, had he been in town!

There is incredible life in **trusting** the symbols of our tradition, in giving them the space and room to breathe, stepping back and allowing them to work as sacrament. Not long ago, Joel and I were on vacation, and, being the first Sunday of the month, we sought a church that would likely be celebrating communion which is, for us, the heart of Christian practice. I left the service feeling empty and sad, as, yes, there was a ritual with bread and juice crammed in at the beginning of the service, done with order and efficiency, almost with an air of embarrassment, in order to get on the with real stuff of scripture and preaching. Somewhere along the line, this congregation has lost trust in what had been entrusted to them. I

could taste the bread and the grape, but it conveyed very little about the incredible goodness and grace of God, nor did it encourage a sense of communion with others gathered there.

Why was it so painful? I have seen miracles occur when the symbols have been trusted. Not long ago, I told you about my dear friend Richard, the sociologist at the University of Wisconsin, whose funeral brought together a veritable feast of diverse religious practitioners around the communion table of Christ. The bread was broken and shared in love by Buddhists, Wiccans, Catholic priests, Jews, various Protestants, agnostics, atheists you name it. It was the power of the symbol trusted and offered that created this astounding event – the peacable kingdom of God come alive in glorious diversity and variety. Some would have doubted that it was even possible, especially in the Catholic church. But not Richard, and not me. Our symbols are meant to heal our world, one meeting at a time.

There **is incredible life** in trusting the symbols of our tradition, the beautiful words, actions, objects, and events that have been entrusted to us. Just last week, our congregation had the joy of baptizing an infant, a teenager, and affirming the Baptism of an adult as she joined us in ministry. I don't know all that will be remembered and taken from that service. For me, it was the sound of the pouring water that transfixed the most fidgety child in prayer, the glow of the candles that lit the faces of the three, and the sight of the baptismal garment, the soft shawl wrapped around each by one of you in the congregation (and perhaps the tears with which you did so!). **Life, light, and welcome** came alive in gesture, word, sound and sensation. If we trust what we have been given, what literally has been traditioned, handed down, to us, God's presence becomes palpable in our midst.

And this is the crux of it – **God is with us**. In all of our readings today an opportunity is given to greet the ever present God in the midst of daily life. In the voice heard by Samuel in the night, in the invitation received from Jesus by Philip and then passed on to Nathanael, in the reflections of the Psalmist on **her** experience (I'm sorry, it just sounds like a **woman** wrote that one!), ordinary human beings like you and like me encounter the

everyday extraordinary, the divine presence, that creates, grounds, and transforms all of life.

In our time, people are **yearning** to encounter the divine presence, to hear and see, to feel and to taste, God in the midst of life. We gather here for **that very purpose**, eager to be addressed by the Living One who calls **our** names. And now, as I look out at **you**, you need to know that I am seeing the **first** and **primary symbol** of our Christian tradition. It is the **people** called and gathered, the **assembly**, the **ekklesia**. This is where the living God is made manifest...**if** we trust the symbol. From ancient times, it is God who gathers the assembly for great purpose, at Sinai, after the Exile, at the call of the early disciples, on the day of Pentecost, and I dare say now, **here** in this place, as our world hungers and thirsts to be made new. The gathering has happened once again, and we, the the holy assembly, must **remember** and **trust who we are**, not simply relics who still “go to church,” but a dynamic symbol of the Spirit's life beating in, among, and through us, enabling us to make visible God's heart in the world.

So now, as the gathered assembly, with eyes wide open and love flowing through our veins, let us bask in God's presence, and trust this ancient symbol to speak... Amen.

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