

## 2 Epiphany Sermon The Rev. Megan Dembi

When I was a kid, I had a kind of strange relationship to my grandparents on my mom's side. My parents, my siblings, and I lived in Idaho, and my grandparents, who I called Buna and Bunu, lived in California. Since we didn't have a whole lot of money while I was growing up, we didn't see each other very often. We were lucky if we saw Buna and Bunu once a year. So my siblings and I didn't really know much about them. We knew they were our grandparents, but we didn't have many opportunities to know them as people. However, even though we didn't know much about them, they tended to know a lot about us—what colors we liked, what foods we liked, even what kinds of games we liked to play. My mom spoke to Buna and Bunu every week, and would tell them all about my and my siblings lives and what we were up to. So even though we only saw them once a year at most, Buna and Bunu were always caught up with the recent events in our lives.

It's strange to consider how people we don't know very well, or even at all, can know so much about us. I'm sure many of us remember big family gatherings growing up—thanksgivings, Christmases, weddings, or even funerals. And at these big events we would often come across more distant family members that we didn't see very often—our dad's cousin, our mom's uncle—people who we knew we were related to but who we'd barely ever spoken to. But in spite of the fact that we hadn't said two words to our mom's aunt Ida, she somehow knew that we'd won the 4<sup>th</sup> grade spelling bee and that we didn't make the basketball team. We might be able to remember it feeling so strange that these adults whom we hardly knew knew so much about us. But if we think about these distant relatives who seemed to always recognize us when we wouldn't even be able to pick them out of a lineup, we can start to understand how well I knows us, even if we don't feel like we know God very well.

God's relationship with us is similar to the relationship I had with Buna and Bunu in many ways. Just as Buna and Bunu knew me before I was born, so God knows us even before our birth, and in fact even before our conception—when what we know of as ourselves never even existed. "My body was not hidden from you, while I was being made in secret and woven in the depths of the earth" as the psalmist says. And like Buna and Bunu, who always seemed to know what was happening in my life, God is always aware of our present moments, but down to even the smallest detail, and including our thoughts and the feelings we hold deep within our hearts. "Lord, you have searched me out and known me;" the psalmist continues. "You know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar."

When Samuel was just a boy and did not even know God since the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him, God called Samuel. At first, Samuel was so ignorant of anything to do with God, that he did not understand God's calling. Each time God spoke to him, Samuel went to the old priest Eli, supposing him to be the one calling him. But eventually Eli helps Samuel to understand that it was God speaking, and he opened himself up to God's voice. Even though Samuel did not know God, God knew him and God called Samuel to a holy calling and made him a trustworthy prophet.

In the Gospel, before Nathanael even meets Jesus he has his doubts about him. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" he scoffs when Philip shares news of the messiah. But even though Nathanael knows nothing of Jesus, Jesus knows Nathanael. When Jesus sees Nathanael coming toward him, he already knows what type of person Nathanael is and what is in his heart. "Here is truly and Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" says Jesus. Nathanael is amazed. "Where did you get to know me?" He asks. He's so astounded that this complete stranger can already understand him so deeply. Surely he and Jesus must know each other. Surely Jesus has somehow heard about him. But that is not the case. Jesus saw Nathanael under the fig tree before Philip met up with him.

Now Jesus did not see Nathanael under the tree with his own eyes. Jesus simply knew he was under the tree because the Son of God knows each and every person deeply and knows every moment

of every person's life. Nathanael knew that Jesus could not have seen him with his own eyes, and finally understood that Jesus was truly the messiah, the Son of God, and the King of Israel.

Just as Buna and Bunu knew me before I was born, so God knew me, and each and every person who has ever lived. Just as God knew Samuel and Christ knew Nathanael, so God knows all people, whether or not they know God. And just as Buna and Bunu began to love me even before I was born, God loved me even before any part of me came into being. And God loves each and every person whom he has created. God loves each and every one of us, and has loved us before we existed, and will continue to love us after our deaths, and into eternity while we dwell with him in heaven. Just as God's knowing us does not require us to know God, so God's loving us does not require us to love God. In fact, God's love for us requires nothing at all. Just as a good grandparents loves their grandchildren in spite of wrongdoings and faults, so God loves all of his children regardless of the wrongs they've done and whatever flaws they may have. Though we may feel as if God is distant and cold, God has watched over us from before we existed, and is present with us at each and every moment of our lives. Though we may feel as if God will not love us unless we make ourselves worthy, God's love for us knows no bounds, and will never waver. Like Samuel and Nathanael, God knows us and God calls us to be better and holier people. But even if we fail to fulfill that calling, God's love for us does not fail. In the midst of this bleak winter weather, let us remind ourselves that God is with us at all times and in all places and knows us better than we know ourselves. Let us recall that we have each been called by God to faithful living. And let us be certain that God's love for us will remain with us for ever and ever. Amen.