

John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” 44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45 Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

46 Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” 47 When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”

48 Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” 49 Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” 50

Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” 51 And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

THE WORD BECOMES FLESH

The gospel of John begins with poetry. “In the beginning was the Word ... the Word was light ... in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness.”

This poetry is an echo of an earlier story in the Bible. The Greek word for beginning is Genesis. And in that book we read that in the beginning God said, “Let there be light ...” And there was light.

Do you see what John is doing? He’s connecting the light of creation with the light of Jesus.

Jesus is like a new Genesis, a new beginning. Once again God is making something out of nothing. We have botched up the good creation He made in the beginning so bad that he has come back to recreate things.

This is John’s Christmas story. Unlike Luke the gospel doesn’t begin with a story about a little child born in humble circumstances. It begins with a new creation.

But, though John’s gospel begins in grand fashion it soon comes down to earth. This One who represents the very light of creation begins His ministry by calling a group of ordinary people, people like you and me, to be his disciples.

In this regard the gospel of John and the other gospels are in agreement.

And I guess the big question is this: Why does Jesus choose to do it this way?

If Jesus is the light of creation, the very Word of God, why does he choose to work with these ordinary people? Wouldn't it have just been more efficient for him to just shine?

When we get into the story we learn that this is indeed a very good and very puzzling question. These ordinary disciples turn out to quit unsuited for the task. In fact in many cases these disciples seem, well, to put it bluntly, not too bright.

The gospel of John may begin with lofty eternal words but the scene soon shifts to some really down to earth people.

If you don't know what John means when he talks about the Word becoming flesh you soon learn. It means that God in Christ has decided to work through our little lives.

INVITED TO FOLLOW

In John's gospel right after the prologue and the baptism of Jesus, what happens first in the ministry of Jesus?

John the Baptist points to Jesus and calls him "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." And Jesus in turn points to his disciples and tells them to "come, follow me."

I believe the Lamb of God who takes away our sins still points to us and says, "I want you to bear my image in the world. I want you to follow me." Jesus, the very Son of God comes into the life of ordinary people and invites them to follow.

That's how it happened long ago with Philip and Nathanael. And that's how it happens with you and me.

We're not here because we're so smart or righteous or religious. We're here because we've been invited. Some messenger of Jesus has come to us and said, "You've got to come and see for yourself. Jesus is the one we've been looking for."

If I were to ask you how you came to faith, I bet all of you could name some person. Perhaps it was a parent or a Sunday school teacher or a friend. But, someone came to you and said in one way or another,

"You've got to come see this Jesus. There's something different about him. His message, his Spirit of forgiveness and peace has changed me.

I'm not sure where this will lead, but I'm going to follow him. And I think you might want to follow him too."

Many of the disciples of Jesus were first disciples of John the Baptist. The disciples of John the Baptist were seekers. They were looking for a Messiah. They were expecting God to intervene in their lives.

As we talked about last week, John the Baptist pointed not to his own ministry but to the ministry of the one who was coming.

John pointed to the one who would baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit. When Jesus came they were ready to follow.

NOT READY TO FOLLOW

But, in today's lesson we learn that at least one potential disciple was not so ready to drop everything and follow Jesus. Jesus calls Philip to be his follower and then Philip finds Nathanael, and tries to recruit him.

Philip says, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." In other words Philip thinks Jesus is the Messiah. Philip thinks Jesus is the one they have been looking for.

But, Nathanael is not so sure. And his doubts hinge on something that Philip told him. Jesus comes from Nazareth.

When we think of God intervening in the world we think of places that are big and important. We can imagine God coming to the temple in Jerusalem. We can imagine God in the holy of holies, high and lifted up as in the vision of Isaiah.

But, it's not so easy to think of God's Savior coming from a hick town like Nazareth. Nathanael pours cold water on Philip's enthusiastic endorsement. He says, "Come on now. You've got to be kidding. Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Now don't misunderstand what Nathanael was saying. Nazareth wasn't a bad town. It just wasn't much of a town.

My Bible dictionary defined Nazareth as "an insignificant and unimportant village."

And so Nathanael was saying in effect,

"Really? The Son of God comes from that place. Who are you kidding?"

We all know towns like Nazareth, those isolated places that the young people can't wait to leave after high school. Maybe you even came from a place like that.

I remember my wife saying as we left a rather uninspiring town to go to another place,

"Well, one thing is true. No matter where we live; its got to be better than here!"

That was Nazareth.

COME AND SEE

But, of course where you're from is not nearly so important as who you are. Philip had met Jesus. And that changed everything.

And so Philip responded to Nathanael's sarcastic remark with an invitation. Don't take my word for it. Come and see for yourself.

I think this is the strongest approach to evangelism. When people object to Jesus invite them to come and see.

People reject Jesus for all sorts of reasons.

Perhaps they have met some Christians who are not very gracious. Perhaps they don't want to leave the religion of their childhood.

Perhaps they just don't believe that the Word has become flesh that the Spirit of God could come from Nazareth or any other human place for that matter.

Those objections are all quite reasonable. I say to that, "That's okay. But, do me one favor. Come and see for yourself.

Come and see Jesus, the real Jesus. Come and see Jesus, not as imperfect followers portray him, not as he is portrayed in the media, but as he is portrayed in the gospels.

Come and meet the Jesus who talks about grace and forgiveness. Come and meet the God who reveals Divinity not in the strong and powerful but in the weak and needy.

Meet the Jesus who comes from Nazareth and yet has a message for the whole world.

And dare to do one more thing. Follow this Jesus for a while. Listen to what he says, and put His radical teachings into practice. And then make a decision about what you believe based upon what you have seen for yourself."

HE MUST INCREASE

Seeing Jesus is always the goal. Like John the Baptist we point not to ourselves but to the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

A few years ago the Episcopal Church in St. Cloud suggested a unique New Year's resolution on their church sign. Quoting the gospel of John the sign read:

"New Year's resolution, 'He must increase, but I must decrease.' (John 3:30)"

This quote is from what John the Baptist said about himself in relation to Jesus' ministry. John's ministry was not about collecting disciples and getting what he wanted; John's ministry was about pointing the way to Jesus. John had to decrease in order for the ministry of Christ to increase.

In the same way, if we are to follow Jesus in the coming year we must learn to seek what Jesus wants us to do more than just doing what we want to do.

We have to decrease. We have to change our way of thinking and be open to the leading of God. We have to follow.

And when we follow Jesus, when we put his teachings into practice then we are able to see him. We are able to understand why He is the Son of God. His influence increases in our life.

Someone once said, "Christianity is not a place to stand but a road to walk."

You can see this pattern throughout the Bible. The essence of faith is to just take the next step. The essence of faith is to just go where God is leading.

And so, following Christ means that we are never standing still.

THE STRUGGLE TO FOLLOW GOD'S PLAN

But, I must admit that I like to stand still. I don't want to move from those things that are comfortable and predictable. I don't want to follow Jesus. Truth be told, I want Jesus to follow me!

There are many more like me. We live in a very self-centered society. We want everything to revolve around what we want. Even churches are often judged by how well "they meet my needs."

But, the Bible challenges this idea. True faith is not about getting our needs met. True faith is about following Jesus. In his letter to the selfish Christians at Corinth Paul asked rhetorically, "Don't you know that you are not your own?"(1 Corinthians 6:19)

It has always been a struggle for God's people to leave their plans in order to follow God's plan. For example, in the Old Testament the prophets are always reluctant to believe and accept the call of God. Like us they had their own plans.

But, God had greater plans. And God called them to preach a difficult word in a time of trouble. God called them to lead His people to the Promised Land.

And in each case God reminded his prophets that he knew them very well. For example, when Moses objected that he wasn't a good speaker, that perhaps he should get someone else to confront Pharaoh, God reminded Moses that He made his mouth!

When Jeremiah objected to God's call to speak truth to power, saying that he was too young, God replied that God knew him when he was in the womb. And even before Jeremiah was born God had plans for his life.

And God knows and calls us as well. God has a plan for our lives. The Word still becomes flesh in our little lives. Even though we live in our own version of "Nazareth", toiling away in obscurity, the Divine is still present in our lives.

And like Nathanael, we will see the heavens opened.

But, first we must meet Jesus. And when we meet Jesus we will learn that God knew us and was with us all along.

GOD KNOWS US

That happened when Nathanael came to Jesus. When Nathanael first arrived Jesus said that Nathanael was "an Israelite without deceit."

And Nathanael replied, "Excuse me. I appreciate the compliment, but I don't think we've met before." But, Jesus continues, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."

This line has always puzzled me. Why was this little revelation so impressive that in the next verse Nathanael changes his mind completely about Jesus? Nathanael shifts from saying that nothing good can come out of Nazareth to saying of Jesus,

"Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

Though we can't know for sure, I like what William Barclay has to say on this passage.

He said that the fig tree was leafy and shady and that it was the custom to sit and meditate under its branches about God's Word. Perhaps Nathanael was doing this, and perhaps his thoughts turned to that promised day when God's chosen one should come.

Jesus saw Nathanael under the fig tree, but he saw more. Jesus saw the very depths of his heart. So Nathanael said to himself, "Here is a man who knows my prayers! This must be the Son of God!"

Nathanael, like the Samaritan woman at the well hears Jesus' words as the most profound prophecy. As the woman put it, Jesus "told me everything I have ever done." (John 4:29) I think that Nathanael had this same sense that Jesus understood him completely.

Jesus told his new follower, Nathanael, "You haven't seen anything yet. Just wait. You will see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

JESUS IS THE WAY

Some of you may recognize an allusion to an Old Testament story.

Jacob was also called by God to be the patriarch of God's chosen people. But, Jacob was a very unlikely candidate for this job. All his life Jacob was a schemer and a climber.

And one of the first people he climbed over to get what he wanted was his own brother. He cheated his brother, Esau out of his birthright and then had to flee into the desert to escape his wrath.

And in the desert this scoundrel fell asleep and was granted a vision. Jacob saw a vision of heaven. There were angels climbing up and down this great ladder.

The ladder is the means by which heaven is reached and the angels are the welcoming, celebrating company of God. For Jacob, the heavens open as a pledge that one day his people will make it to the Promised Land.

Jacob the scoundrel got to see things few mortals get to see. Despite his weaknesses Jacob was indeed the patriarch of God's chosen people. Jacob was called by God.

And Jacob is our ancestor as well. Jacob may not have been the best person in the world, but God called him and God used him to accomplish his purpose.

Nathanael may not have been the most insightful person in the world, but God called him and God used him to accomplish his purpose.

And I believe the story continues. The Word became flesh when Jesus entered the world, and the Word becomes flesh today when very ordinary disciples find the courage to follow Jesus wherever He leads them today.

But, there is one big difference between Jacob's vision and Jesus' prediction. Instead of climbing a ladder, the angels are ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.

Jesus is the ladder, the bridge between heaven and earth. It is Jesus who makes forgiveness possible. It is Jesus who allows us to see the glory of God in human form. This is the greater thing that Nathanael will witness in the days to come.

Jesus reveals to Nathanael that he, Jesus, is the way by which heaven is reached. The welcoming, celebrating angelic band now welcomes the one who responds to Christ in faith.

Nathanael will experience more in his life as a follower of Jesus Christ than he would ever have dared to imagine.

The next time we hear of Nathanael, he is with a few other disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee once again. He is a part of the greatest experience any human being has ever experienced.

It is the Easter breakfast encounter with the Christ who had been crucified, but now appeared once again to his followers.

THE NATHANAEL SHIFT

We are invited to be a part of the company that follows Christ. The Lord knows us more fully than we even know ourselves. And the greatest joy of all is that we are promised the eternal presence of God. Heaven comes down, and Jesus is the “ladder” that connects the Word with flesh forever.

A preacher called this the “Nathanael shift”. Nathanael shifted from asking, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” to proclaiming, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God.”

This shift takes place after Nathanael actually meets Jesus. Coming and seeing Jesus made all the difference.

And this is what I want for us. I want us to experience the Nathanael shift. I want us to meet Jesus today.

There’s a difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus. We can know about Jesus by reading and studying about his life.

But, the only way to know Jesus is to follow him. The only way to know Jesus is to leave the old way of life behind and go where he leads you.

The path will be different for each new disciple, but the way will be guided by the words and example of Jesus. He will be the ladder that connects us with the Divine will. He is the “way, the truth and the life.” (John 14:6)

Amen.