

Second Sunday after the Epiphany
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
14 January 2024

John 1:43-51

Soon after John the Baptist baptizes Jesus in the River Jordan, he sees Jesus walking by and exclaims to his disciples, "Behold the Lamb of God!" After hearing this, two of his disciples followed Jesus and "stayed with him." One of these was Andrew who after hearing and staying with Jesus finds his brother Simon Peter and brings him to Jesus. Soon after this, Jesus arrives in Galilee and calls Phillip. We are not told much about Phillip other than he followed Jesus as soon as he called. He is from the same town of Peter and his brother Andrew. In the same way Andrew brought Peter into the movement, Philip will bring in another one of the twelve: Nathanael.

All gospels give us their unique version of how and in what order Jesus called his original twelve apostles. Next week we will see the calling of the twelve by Mark, but today we see the beginnings of this assembling of friends in John. There are several differences between John and the other gospels in how these twelve are assembled. In John, the early disciples don't leave a job, a family, or even a village to follow Jesus. Of course in a real way they do, but in John these men were already in a spiritual journey. They were seekers and several were disciples of John who chose to follow Jesus after John pointed to him. In a way, they left a Rabbi to follow another Rabbi. But there is also another significant feature in this Gospel of John. Apostles are bringing their friends and relatives into the movement, Andrew brings Simon, and Philip brings Nathanael.

Philip tells Nathanael, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." In John's Gospel there is an early association between Jesus and the Messiah announced by the prophets. This association grows during three years in the other Gospels, but in John it is an immediate association. "We have found" says Philip, which means that they had been looking, searching, listening to the Baptizer, reading the signs of the times. And as each finds or is brought to Jesus, each comes to believe rather quickly that Jesus is the Messiah. How? He tells them something about their identity they didn't know before or they didn't expect Jesus to know. To Simon, he says, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter.)" To Nathanael today, Jesus says, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" This is followed by a remarkable statement, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." This is another way of saying, "Before

I called you, I knew you. Back in your village, many miles away from where I am standing, I saw you and I knew you.”

Twice in consecutive action we hear the expression, “Come and see.” When Andrew and the other disciple of the Baptizer follow Jesus, they asked him, “Where are you staying?” to which Jesus replied, “Come and see.” Now in this passage, Nathanael tells Philip, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” to which Philip responds, “Come and see.” But there is also another theme repeated quite often in these verses of John. Andrew **finds** Simon and says to him “We have **found** the Messiah,” Jesus **finds** Philip and says, “Follow me.” Then Philip **finds** Nathanael and says, “We have **found** the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote.” This interplay between finding, being found, and **coming and seeing** highlights the importance of those first encounters between Jesus and his early disciples. It also shows us the great role earliest disciples had in bringing their friends and siblings to Jesus.

But many commentators have problems with the “finding or having found” Jesus, as though Jesus was in hiding and their diligent search led them to finding this Messiah. Perhaps a better way of understanding this finding is, “We have come to know” or “We have discovered” or we “we have been led to the Messiah.” There is Joy in this discovery, but we cannot ignore the fact that Jesus has been on his own search for these disciples as well. In fact, I would say that in the Gospel of John, it is Jesus himself who does the finding. He finds the truth within them and captures their hearts and their imaginations from the very first encounter with them. “You are a Jew without deceit... I saw you under the tree,” he tells Nathanael. This pattern of capturing someone’s heart by revealing them to themselves will be seen in many other interactions Jesus will have in this Gospel. The Samaritan will say, “I’ve met a man who told me everything about me!”

After Jesus reveals Nathanael to himself, the new disciple proclaims “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus responds, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” 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.” All of these statements from a brand new disciple and to a new disciple show a very high Christology, a supremely well refined theological understanding of who Jesus is, what he has come to earth to do, and what the final outcome of the whole story will be, “You will see the heaven open, angel ascending and descending...” And all of this on their first date! It took three years for Jesus to reveal the complete nature of his mission to his apostles and friends in the other three Gospels. In fact, as they discover more and more about who this Jesus is, he often

tells them to tell no one yet. But in John, the veil is removed and the Apostles are treated to the meaning of all the signs from the very start. This is a Gospel from the other side of the curtain. A Gospel of signs in which every person and circumstance becomes a sign of something deeper pointing to God's own reality and mission.

But lest we become lost in the weeds, I want to return to Philip and even to Jesus' evangelistic methods. When the disciples of John ask Jesus where he is staying, he says "Come and see." There was no big theological conversation, but rather an invitation to see for themselves. This is also what Philip does. Nathanael wants to know if anything good can come out of Nazareth and rather than a Bible study on prophesy, or a moralistic rebuking about his own elitism, or a long narrative of everything he had seen Jesus do and say, all Philip says is "Come and see." Philip is convinced that one encounter with Jesus will be enough for Nathanael to make up his own mind. His job was to point to the Messiah and then stay out of the way. This is a great example of evangelism for us. We don't need a suitcase full of bibles to tell people about Jesus. All it takes is an invitation and an introduction. Jesus will do the rest.

Jesus makes a reference to the famous Jacob's ladder of Genesis 28:12 with "the angels of God ascending and descending." This is very much in keeping with the prologue of the Gospel. Though the birth of the Messiah in human form the wall of separation between God and humanity has been broken, shattered, torn apart and now, "Jesus, himself, has now become the bridge between heaven and earth, between divine and human, temporal and eternal. The place to meet God is not the ladder of Jacob's dream at Bethel, but Jesus."¹ But how are people going to find this new meeting place, this bridge between heaven and earth, unless we, the disciples of Jesus, show them the way?

Today, I pray that we may be good signs of God's love for broken humanity and that others may choose to "come and see" because of the quality of our lives. May our Lord continue to bless you. Amen!

¹ <https://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john1x43.htm>