

Pastor T.C. Arnold
St. Bartholomew
John 1:43-51
August 24th, 2014

August is a rather unremarkable month. Each month of the year has some special holiday or celebration that gives it a singular meaning or “feeling”. That is, every month except August. It has 31 unremarkable days with nothing specific to be celebrated. Well, August is the month of my birthday, which was yesterday – so for me it holds a little more significance – something to be celebrated, but not for most people. Besides the big event of “going back to school” or “starting weekday school” for another year, there is not much going on. When I was young I didn’t even like August because it meant that summer was over. And when I was a kid we always went back to school after my birthday which meant I didn’t even get to bring cupcakes to my class to celebrate my big day. I guess, even for me as a kid, August was pretty unremarkable.

We even have an unremarkable man we consider on this day in the life of the Church. Today is St. Bartholomew Day, which has been celebrated by the church as such for centuries. “Who is St. Bartholomew,” you might ask? “The church has been celebrating him for centuries? I haven’t even heard of him.” He seems pretty unremarkable. Well, this man is mostly likely Nathanael in the Gospel text for today (and I will use both of these names to refer to the same person). While we know a lot about Peter, James and John, the other disciples of Jesus, we know very little about Nathanael. But could he be more remarkable than we give him credit for? Well, we aren’t talking about Nathanael today as being remarkable because he is a remarkable man. His words were, however.

So, while we might see a man who was an unremarkable disciple... who made unremarkable remarks... and had an unremarkable faith... I would rather like to show you how remarkable Jesus made this man, what he said... and by virtue of Jesus’s remarks... made all of you His remarkable children.

We have already considered how unremarkable of a disciple Bartholomew – or Nathanael – was. His name appears in the Gospel and shows up on family listings. He was there to hear the instruction of Jesus with the others and was present for the Ascension of our Lord. But really that’s all we know – except for what He said here in John chapter one. He had an unremarkable statement that sounded more like words of doubt than words of faith. These words when hearing about Jesus the Messiah went like this: “*Nazareth, can anything good come out of Nazareth?*” Nazareth was an unremarkable town. Nathanael was from Cana, a short distance from Nazareth. He knew how unassuming this small town was. Nazareth was not the kind of town from which one would expect a king – from Cana maybe, but hardly from Nazareth.

Isn’t Nathanael’s attitude toward Philip a familiar one? We are knowledgeable people – perhaps even more remarkable than this disciple. We’ve spent time pondering the things of God, the ways of life, the questions that have been asked about creation, suffering, forgiveness, and everything in between. We have heard about and pondered the spectacular signs and wonders of God – the destruction of the evil world by a flood, the deliverance of the Children of Israel through the Red Sea, the assaults on sickness by Christ, His tender regard for children, His compassion for the poor, and His triumph over death. This is the way a good God should act. But when we are confronted with God’s silence in the face of adversity and evil, our faith hesitates. So did Nathanael’s.

Nathanael’s faith hesitated because he had a hard time believing that from Nazareth, a Savior could come. Has your faith every hesitated, or “questioned” God, His work, His intentions, His silence? Mine has. I want to be up front with you. I have wondered about God’s wisdom, about His desire to help those He loves, and probably every other thing you as a Christian have

asked over the years in conversations with your friends – your family – with your pastor – and even in your conversations with God. Here’s what I want to say about those questions, and this may sound strange, but God teaches us something through this unremarkable man and his unremarkable faith: Jesus accepts doubt.

I want you to notice something in the text. Jesus did not scold Nathanael for his arrogant put-down. He didn’t lambaste him for his learning – or lack thereof – and say, “Nathanael, if you would have listened to the prophets more, studied the Scriptures more, if you would stop relying so much on your own mind and reason, you’d have no difficulty believing Philip.” Instead, Jesus complimented him. When he approached, Jesus said, “*Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!*”

Jesus recognizes that there is honesty in the right kind of doubt. The bad doubt is unbelief. But the good doubt Jesus affirms doesn’t want to be taken in. It probes and examines. It rejects what is false and seeks after truth. Good doubt is not satisfied with what it wishes were so, but rather is willing to wait for what is genuine and true.

Beloved, don’t live like a bad doubter – as if we were a part of the unbelieving crowd. The unbelievers will seek for wisdom found in self or satisfaction in vices provided by the world. Turn away from such things. Rather, be like St. Bartholomew – anxious for the Savior’s coming and wanting to be sure that it is really Him. And then, when it’s affirmed, we like Bartholomew say, “*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!*”

So, what kind of proof does He offer to you? Could it be that the signs of God’s presence and love for you are so plentiful that we don’t recognize them as footprints of the Divine but see them as only ordinary? It would be so marvelous to see the parting of the Red Sea as a miracle offering proof of God’s existence and care. But isn’t there more proof in the predictability and precision with which the laws of nature work – the providence of God for you each day – the fact that God is with us each day.

Beloved in the Lord, this is what we need... It’s His Word of hope and life that includes promises that never falter. What seems ordinary like bread and wine and water are the means by which that same Jesus that Bartholomew encountered first through Philip’s invitation is given to us today. Beloved, know and believe that God uses unremarkable means to give you what is remarkable – faith, forgiveness and life.

Jesus’ earthly life had many unremarkable details – His place of birth, His parents... Jesus’ death was unremarkable – so to speak. There were many executions by way of being hung on a cross. But only Jesus can make the most unremarkable thing remarkable. And that’s what He makes you. So no matter how you quantify your unremarkable faith – whether you think it is big or small – I’m still encouraged. I’m encourage because of St. Bartholomew and his faith and how Jesus called him. I’m encouraged because it is out of faith the size of mustard seeds that God grows fabulous, fruitful and larger-than-life trees. God takes questions like, “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth,*” and turns them into “*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel.*”

Don’t think of your life, your faith, the faith that perhaps at times questions or doubts as unremarkable. That’s what we make it. But Jesus makes it more. By His work, His gifts, His love and forgiveness – He has made you the most remarkable precious child of God the Father. You are His very own – now that’s remarkable. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.