

January 17, 2021

Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Green)

1 Samuel 3:1-10

John 1:43-51

Sermon: Calling New Disciples

Many people view this time of year as boring, dark, monotonous. I see it a different way. Whether I am walking my dogs or driving on my way to church, I observe things I do not see at other times of the year. The trees and shrubs are empty of leaves and the heavy snows have smashed down many of the tall goldenrods and grasses. When I look into the surrounding woodlands, I can see new things. I see the topography, the shape and contours of the land supporting the trees. I can see through the woods a great distance, sometimes seeing deer or turkeys. I see houses and roads that I didn't know existed. God has pulled back the veil of greenery to reveal something different, to expose what is hidden from sight during any other season. But you have to look to see it. We don't often look because there isn't a visual attraction - a splash of color or movement or diversity. It all looks the same - brown and void of beauty. What's there to see?

When we read a passage like today's from the Gospel of John, there is a surface story that sounds familiar and plain. We have heard it before. The message is about Jesus calling men to be his disciples. But I can't accept that there isn't more to learn. We have to keep looking to find deeper meaning. Let's begin by understanding why John is writing this gospel. We find that in Chapter 20:31

The purpose of John's Gospel:

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John 20:31

Two outcomes John wants to produce when this gospel is read.
You may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God
And - by believing you may have life in his name.

Philip - Was already convinced Jesus was the Messiah promised by the prophets.

Jesus simply said to him, "Follow me". Well, it probably wasn't just that simple. Philip may have been among those who heard the witness of John the Baptizer about Jesus being the Lamb of God. And he may have been among those who spent a day with Jesus listening to him expounding the OT scriptures of the Messiah that were fulfilled by him.

That's the message we hear in Philip's invitation to Nathanael. "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." In any case, Philip was so convinced of who Jesus was, he had to tell Nathanael.

Nathanael on the other hand was not so easily convinced. When he heard from Philip that Jesus was from Nazareth, he expressed doubt. "Can anything good come from there?"

Nathanael seems to echo the statements of the Jews who questioned the messianic claims about Jesus. The Jews knew the scripture reference of Micah that the Savior would come from Bethlehem. They testified to that in Matthew's Gospel when the Magi visited Jerusalem seeking the one who was born king of the Jews. Herod asked his Jewish leaders what the prophets said about the Messiah and they quoted Micah 5:2.

How could someone who was from Nazareth, fulfill the prophecy?

There also seems to be some question about the reputation of Nazareth in general. People from Judea looked down on people from Galilee. Cana and Nazareth were both towns in Galilee, but people in Cana looked down on Nazarenes.

Much like somebody from the greater Pittsburgh area might say, "Could anything good come from Cleveland?"

Philip, hearing the doubts of Nathanael, told him to come and see for yourself. Nathanael went with Philip, indicating he was willing to believe.

When Jesus met Nathanael, he talked to Nathaniel as if he already knew him. Jesus said, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

Nathanael responded to Jesus's affirmation of his character by questioning Jesus. "How do you know me?" We can hear that Nathanael has doubts, but Jesus has caught his attention.

I think what Jesus said meant more than we realize to Nathanael. We have to look again at what has been revealed by Jesus to see what lies underneath.

I believe Jesus revealed the heart of Nathanael in a way that surprised Nathanael.

Keep in mind these scriptures are brief in describing these interactions. John, the Gospel writer, was sharing ways that the disciples had come to believe in Jesus. That's all he needed to record to support his point that Jesus was who he said he was. A reader in

John's day would have easily understood the meaning of what John wrote.

Allow me to postulate this scenario.

Jesus told Nathanael he was an honest, straightforward person, no deceit. This was a compliment.

Jesus meant that Nathanael was a true believing Israelite, one who had searched the scriptures and believed in God and his plan of redeeming the world through the Messiah.

Nathanael already had a heart for the truth of God's plan for redemption.

Nathanael's belief was likely true because he believed he could not earn his way to heaven. He recognized he was a sinner in need of God's mercy.

He accepted the need for a savior, the Messiah from God.

He didn't understand how the Messiah would accomplish this, but he had faith in God's plan for redemption as promised in the Old Testament.

Most of the religious Jews of that day believed they had to earn God's favor to receive a place in heaven. God's favor could be earned by participating in religious activities to demonstrate their piety - keeping the commandments, abiding by Jewish customs (most of which were laws written by leaders that expanded Old Testament Law), offering sacrifices, fasting, memorizing scripture, and so on.

They were deceiving themselves and those who listened to them.

That is not the message of the Old Testament.

Nathanael was not a scribe, Pharisee, Sadducee, or priest. He was a common working person who was searching for truth. He was a Jew

by heritage, but a true Israelite from the line of Jacob who believed in God's plan. His heart was seeking truth, not religion. This is what Jesus saw in Nathanael.

The response of Jesus to Nathanael's question, "How do you know me?" was an additional sign to Nathanael that Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus said, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

At the surface, this seems like an unremarkable statement. Keep in mind Philip went away to find Nathanael. He was not within sight of Jesus. Jesus did not literally see Nathanael under a fig tree. I believe there was something here we may not fully understand in our language. To me, "under the fig tree" must have been code for something. You know, an expression that said one thing but had a hidden meaning. Like the saying, "You can't see the forest for the trees."

Again, let's peel back the surface and look within.

Several places in the OT, the reference to being "under their own vine and under their own fig tree" was a reference to a time of peace and prosperity for the people of Israel.

This image was also used by the prophets as a threat to Israel when they strayed from God's will. God would send an enemy to destroy or devour their vines and fig trees.

During the days of Jesus it was said that "under a fig tree" was the appropriate place to contemplate the scriptures. The image seems to be one of peaceful meditation on God's Word, where one can experience the security and peace of the kingdom of God.

When I put this together, I think the message from Jesus to Nathanael demonstrated the supernatural power of Jesus to know the hearts of men and women. The Holy Spirit had revealed to Jesus where Nathanael was found, but also why he was there. Nathanael was searching the scriptures and possibly praying for a revelation of the Messiah. Whatever it was, Jesus knew and exposed something about Nathanael's heart that only Nathanael knew. This prompted Nathanael to exclaim Jesus as the Son of God and king of Israel.

So John the Gospel writer develops his point through this encounter that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

This is the message unbelievers need to hear and believers need to remember.

Believers, let's keep looking at what else might be revealed to us. What else has God uncovered for us to see that has been hidden in a surface reading of this passage?

John the Baptizer testified about the good news of the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ. Philip (and Andrew) heard the message from John and again from Jesus. Jesus asked Philip to follow him and Philip took the message to Nathanael. Nathanael came to see Jesus and hear for himself. Do you see the pattern here?

First, there had to be a message, a testimony, good news to share.

Somebody had to speak it.

Somebody had to hear it.

Then they had to tell it to somebody else.

We don't all hear the Gospel from the same source or in the same way.

Philip heard it from the Baptizer and Jesus as fulfillment of prophecy.

Nathanael heard it from Jesus through a revelation.

We don't all receive the same signs or affirmations. Not all people will respond the same way.

Philip listened out of curiosity and interest, then told Nathanael.

Nathanael heard from Philip and doubted at first, then boldly proclaimed the good news after meeting Jesus face to face.

But the good news is good news for all.

Believer, do you see it now? If not, keep looking. Even when the message has lost its luster and seems all too familiar, look again.

Go, sit under your fig tree. That's where God can reveal secrets that you need to know about him, then you can proclaim the good news to others.