

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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"Divine Delegation"

John 1:43-51 (NRSV)

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."

IN THE BEGINNING

John's gospel begins, "In the beginning was the Word ..." And this Word was the Word of creation. John continues, "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being."

We read this poetic passage in our worship service this past Christmas Eve. John told the Christmas story as a kind of creation story. When the word became flesh, it was like a whole new creation. In other words John 1 is an echo of Genesis 1.

You'll remember that in Genesis after God created the world God creates humanity. God creates these human beings in his own image.

DIVINE DELEGATOR

And after right God creates humanity in his own image, God gives them a job to do.

God said to these first people, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

In others words, right after creating the world and human beings God tells these new creations to take care of this world that He has created.

Maybe that's one of the things that being created in the image of God means. We are created to project God's image in the world. We are created to do God's business.

One of the tests of leadership is the ability to pick the right followers and trust them to do the right thing. Well, God must trust us very much. From the very beginning God has chosen us to do his work. God has given us great responsibility.

God is from the very beginning the Divine Delegator.

IMAGE

The Hebrew word translated “image” in the Genesis passage is the same word used in the ancient world to describe the statue of a king. The king could not be everywhere at once so he sent statues of his image to be set up in the town square throughout the empire. The king was present through his image; this statue that represented his claim to power and rule.

The Bible tells us that we are made in God’s image. That is, we are God’s representative. When we do God’s work God is present through us. The Bible tells us that we are “ambassadors for Christ.” God makes his appeal for peace and reconciliation through us. (2 Corinthians 5:20)

In John’s gospel right after the prologue and the baptism of Jesus, what happens first? Does Jesus do a miracle? Does he preach about the kingdom?

No, the first thing Jesus does is to call everyday, ordinary people like us to follow him. 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.”

Each week we come to church and celebrate our faith in God. And we also hope that through worship we can deepen our faith in Christ and his kingdom.

But, this Sunday we also come to celebrate *Christ’s faith in us*.

God in Christ calls us to come follow him and do his will in the world.

CALLED ACCORDING TO A PURPOSE

So, how does this call from God come? Once again we learn that the call comes first from the plan and purpose of God. (cf. Romans 8:28) In our lesson for today it is Jesus who decides to go to Galilee, find Philip and tell him, “Follow me.”

Notice also how the call of Christ spreads. In the passage before this one, Andrew is invited by Jesus to “come and see” what the kingdom of God is all about. And Andrew responds by finding his brother, Simon and bringing him to Jesus. (John 1:37-42)

In our passage for today there is a similar pattern. Jesus invites Philip to “follow me.” Philip responds by finding Nathanael and telling him about Jesus.

The call comes from Jesus, but the call also comes through other people who invite us to come and see Jesus for ourselves.

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.

The Episcopal Church in St. Cloud had a neat slogan on their church sign, “New Year’s Resolution for 2009: “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.

NAZARETH

I like the way one commentator put it. He said, “Christianity is not a place to stand but a road to walk.” I think this is an important truth. Following Christ means that we are never standing still.

It’s my experience that we like to stand still. It gives us comfort to think that things will always be the same. The world might not be what we want it to be, but at least we can know where everyone stands.

I think this is why Nathanael had trouble believing in Jesus at first. Nathanael knew how the world worked and part of that world view was this, “Nothing good ever comes out of Nazareth.”

When Philip said that he had found the one Moses and the prophets wrote about, Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanael was not impressed. He responded with that now famous question, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Now it wasn’t that Nazareth was a bad town; it just wasn’t much of a town. My Bible dictionary defined Nazareth as “an insignificant and unimportant village.”

And according to one of my parishioners who visited that place recently, this is still an accurate description. It still is insignificant and unimportant village. In fact this town is never mentioned outside of references to Jesus in the New Testament.

This is one of the reasons many people have trouble with the call of Jesus. His kingdom and his call are so human and come from such humble beginnings.

They just can't believe that the Messiah comes from such a mundane, out of the way place. We might believe that the Messiah could come from Jerusalem or New York or Washington or on this week even Chicago.

But, who could believe that anything good can come out of Nazareth? The story of Jesus is the story of how the Word becomes flesh. And that means the word of God comes to light up the loneliest, darkest places. God comes in a lowly manger. God comes to those that the world has rejected.

God comes from Nazareth.

This is not what Nathanael expected. And this is not what we expect either. We still think that the truth of God must come from those who have the most influence and prestige.

Even in the church we sometimes celebrate "success" as defined by the world instead of looking for the Messiah who comes from Nazareth. No wonder we think that think that God couldn't choose someone like us.

But, God does.

I have preached this message for a long time. No one disagrees with me. The people say, "Yes, it's true. God does call ordinary people."

But, then the nominating committee meets and asks people to be officers in the church. And people say, "Oh yes I know that God calls ordinary people but not me. I couldn't possibly be a leader in the church. I'm too ... (fill in the blank). I'm too young. I'm too old. I'm not smart enough."

The excuses go on and on, but they are summarized by what Nathanael said about Jesus. We still don't believe that anything good can come out of Nazareth. We doubt that the Word can become flesh in our little lives.

COME AND SEE

For those of us like Nathanael who doubt that anything good can come out of Nazareth, there is only one way to get over it. We must (as Philip put it to Nathanael) "come and see." We must base our decision about Jesus upon our own personal encounter.

We must come and hear his voice and consider his claim upon our lives.
We must come and see Jesus for ourselves.

When Nathanael came to Jesus, Nathanael found that Jesus already knew him. 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. 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.

HEAVENLY VISION

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.”

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. (If Jacob had lived today, he would undoubtedly work on Wall Street.)

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.

JESUS THE LADDER

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.

We are invited to be a part of the company that follows Christ. We are known by the Lord 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.

THE NATHANAEL SHIFT

Several years ago a certain generation was referred to as the "me" generation. I'm not sure which generation they were talking about (surely not mine!), but it still seems to still

apply to many of us. We want everything to revolve around what we want. Even churches are judged by how well “they meet my needs.”

But, the Bible challenges this idea. For example, Paul asked the selfish Christians at Corinth, “Don’t you know that you are not your own?”
(1 Corinthians 6:19)

In the Old Testament prophets are always reluctant to believe and accept the call of God. After all they have their own plans. But, God insists. Before they were even born God had a plan for their lives. God knew them, and God called them.

And God knows and calls us as well. The Word still becomes flesh in our little lives. Even though we live in “Nazareth”, the Divine is still present in our lives. We will see the heavens opened.

But, first we must meet Jesus.

One preacher talks about what he called 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.

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 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)

We are asked to come and see for ourselves. Won’t you come today?

Amen.