

“COME AND SEE FOR YOURSELF”

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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.”

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Today is the second Sunday after the Epiphany.

What is Epiphany you say?

I’m glad you asked.

An epiphany is defined as a moment of sudden, unexpected revelation or insight.

It's that "aha" moment.

We've all experienced that.

The Epiphany...

the Epiphany to end all epiphanies is the revelation of Jesus Christ.

In the Bible, Jesus is revealed to be the Son of God, the Messiah, the King of kings.

In the Christian year the celebration of Epiphany features the coming of the Wise Men.

They see the star of a newborn king in the sky, and they come to worship him.

Like the shepherds before them,
they want to come and see for themselves what the heavens have revealed.

You know the rest of that story.

The wise men came to Jerusalem and asked,

"Where is this one who is born king of the Jews?"

We have seen his star rise in the east."

Well this did not go over well in the capital city.

In fact, it scared everyone to death...

including their paranoid old king, Herod.

He summoned the wise men to the palace and said,

"Find this new king for me.

I want to go and worship him too."

Well the wise men leave the palace and continue to follow the star.

They are not disappointed.

They find the child, Jesus, and bring him their gifts.

The Bible tells us that when they saw for themselves, they were overwhelmed with joy.

As the choir put it in our Christmas Eve service, they “rejoiced with exceeding great joy.”

They saw for themselves, and that made all the difference..

I think we can look at almost every story in the gospels as an extension of this Epiphany story.

When people seek and find Jesus ...
They are filled with great joy.

They are healed.
They worship him.

They come to faith.
They follow him.

And that’s why we have today’s lesson from the gospel of John on the second Sunday after the Epiphany.

It’s another Epiphany story.
It’s about another person who decides to come and see the Messiah for himself.

NATHANAEL

His name is Nathanael.

But, this story is a bit different.
Unlike the wise men, Nathanael was not inclined to believe.
Nathanael saw no star in the east.

Nathanael had only the testimony of Philip.

And for Nathanael, that was not enough.

The Bible tells us that Jesus decided to go to Galilee.
And in Galilee Jesus found Philip and asked him to be his disciple.

Jesus said, "Come follow me."

Philip accepted that challenge because he believed that Jesus was the Messiah.

For Philip, Jesus of Nazareth was the one that Moses and the prophets had written about.

And so Philip, filled with hope and joy goes to tell Nathanael.

"Nathanael, I've met the Messiah.
He's the one that the prophets predicted.
He comes from Nazareth."

Nathanael almost chokes trying to keep from laughing out loud.

"Nazareth?
How can that be?
Nothing good ever comes out of Nazareth!"

That kind of cynicism is still with us.
Today people might say something like,
"Can anything good come out of Washington, DC?"

Or maybe they might say, "Can anything good come from the news media?"

Or can anything good come from ... well you name it.

We often prejudge people and places.
And this prejudicial filter keeps us from really seeing the world as it is.

We all do this, but most of the time we don't realize it.

COME AND SEE FOR YOURSELF

I feel sorry for Philip.

I know what it's like to have good news to share.
You go to a friend and excitedly tell him the good news.

And what happens?

He throws the wet blanket of prejudice on it all.
He says,

“That sounds too good to be true.
You can’t trust those folks.
Nothing good ever comes from that place.”

When that happens we often become defensive.
We try to prove to the skeptic that our good news is truly good.

In fact, in our day, it seems like everyone feels this desire to be absolutely right about everything ... politics, health, religion...whatever.

And whenever encounter a negative view, it’s all out war to convince the other person.

“Well, you better believe what I have to say.
You and the world are on the road to perdition if you don’t believe it.”

But, that’s where Philip is different.
He isn’t defensive.
He doesn’t threaten Nathanael with dire consequences if he doesn’t believe.

He doesn’t try to defend Nazareth.
He doesn’t say,

“Nazareth isn’t that bad.
The weather is nice in Nazareth.
And, yes the people are quirky.
But, they’re okay once you get to know them.”

In fact Philip ignores the Nazareth jab and instead just says.

“Come and see for yourself.”

When it comes to Jesus, nothing beats personal experience.

It’s one thing to know about Jesus.
It’s another thing to meet Jesus face to face.

I wonder if Philip's response to Nathanael might be a good one for us to try.

"Come and see for yourself.
Come and meet Jesus.
Make up your own mind."

No sales pitch.
No threats.
No lengthy explanations.

Just an invitation.
Come and see.

Like Philip we are called by Jesus to issue this invitation.
It's a come as you are party.

No need for a hostess gift.
No need to RSVP.

No need to get your house in order.
No need to wear fancy clothes.

You can bring your skepticism.
You can bring your biases.

Just come.
Come and see.

Amazingly enough, the Bible tells us that the Spirit of Christ resides in and empowers the church.

More than that, the church is (as the apostle Paul put it) the body of Christ.
(I Corinthians 12)

The church puts a human face on the grace of God in Jesus Christ. In the church we can meet Christ.

Now, this is not to say that the church is Christ.
But, the church is the manger where the Messiah can be found.

You can expect some pushback on this point.

Everyone has had experience with a church that was not what it was supposed to be.

Anyone who offers an invitation to church is going to run into someone who says,
 “Nothing good can come out of the church.
 You should hear what happened to me.”

Without arguing that “our church” is somehow different or better...
 We just make an offer.
 “Come and see.”

We seek Jesus in this place.
 Come and join us in that journey.
 Come and see.

HONEST DOUBT AS A PATH TO FAITH

Nathanael’s reluctance to believe in Jesus before he came and saw for himself, reminds me of another story in John’s gospel.

Remember when Jesus appeared to all of his disciples after the resurrection.
 But, one disciple, Thomas was not there.

And Thomas would not believe what the disciples told him.

Thomas would have to see for himself.
 He would have to put his hand in the nail scarred hand.

He would have to touch the wound where Jesus was stabbed with a sword.

But, of course once Thomas saw the risen Christ,
 there was no need for such confirmation.
 One encounter with the risen Christ caused him to say,

“My Lord and my God.”

I’ve always thought that we’ve given Thomas a bad rap.

We emphasize his doubt.
“Doubting Thomas” we call him.

But, his doubt did not lead to despair.
His honest doubt led to salvation.

And I think this is also true of Nathanael.
His skepticism is born out of honest doubt.

All of us are subject to the fear that says ...

...there's no hope
...that nothing good can come out of Nazareth
... or anywhere else or that matter.

But, the message from heaven is “don't be afraid.”
God is coming to Nazareth.
God is coming to all those places that the world has forgotten.

Do you live in a place that is the object of ridicule?
Don't despair.

The Bible tells us that this is where salvation begins.
Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?
You bet.

The Son of God came from that place.
And that gives hope to all of us.

When Nathanael finally comes to Jesus,
Jesus says of him,

“Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”

It was Nathanael's honesty that led him to become a seeker.

He came to Jesus because, despite his skepticism,
he wanted to see for himself.

I think some folks are prevented from coming to Jesus because we get sidetracked.

We worry too much about defending “the church”
... or some prized point of theology.

The world is filled with endless debates about what constitutes “true” religion ...
...debates about where and how we should worship.

But, what the seeker really needs

... is to come and see Jesus.
What the seeker really needs
... is an experience of faith.

It’s one thing to know about Jesus.

It’s quite another to thing to know Jesus.

JESUS KNOWS US

When Jesus says that Nathanael is “an Israelite in whom there is not deceit.”

Nathanael asks,

“You just met me.
How can you say that?”

And Jesus replies,

“I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

Apparently this ability of Jesus to see Nathanael before Nathanael even knows about Jesus makes a big impression.

Nathanael responds by saying,

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

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 com-
pletely.

Jesus saw Nathanael.
Jesus knew Nathanael.

And so when this seeker finds Jesus.
He learns that Jesus was with him and for him all along.

That's how it is with God's grace.
It's with us before we even know that we need it.

God in Christ knows us and seeks us out
before we are able to come and see for ourselves.

THE LADDER TO HEAVEN

Jesus tells Nathanael that there's more to come.
This is just the beginning of their relationship, their journey together.

And before it's all over he will see greater things.

He will even see "heaven opened
and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Jesus is alluding to a story from the Hebrew Scriptures.

Remember Jacob?

Jacob was also called by God to be the leader 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.

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 would become the patriarch of God's chosen people.

Jacob was called by God.

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.

MORE TO COME

I believe all of us are at the beginning of our journey with Jesus.

There's more to come for all of us.

Nathanael's commitment to Jesus was sincere.

But, it was incomplete.

There was still a lot about Jesus that Nathanael didn't know and understand about Jesus.

This was true for all the disciples.

They needed to be willing to go where Jesus would lead them.

They had more to learn.
They had more to see.

The invitation to “come and see” is not just an invitation for the seeker who doesn’t know Jesus;
it’s also a challenge for those who are already his disciples.

With Jesus there is always more to see.

This seems particularly important at the beginning of a new year.
When we journey with Jesus it’s not more of the same.

It’s something new.

Today is a special day in the life of our church.
We ordain and install new officers.

Whenever a person agrees to become a new officer,
it’s always a bit of a Nathanael moment.

These officers take on new responsibility.
They have agreed to come and see in a new way where Jesus is leading.

There’s a bit of anxiety when a person becomes an elder.

But, there’s also a sense of excitement.

We have decided to come and see where God might be leading.

But, this task is not just limited to those who have agreed to be officers in the church.

This task is for everyone who would be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

And so this day I offer a challenge to all of us,
“Come and see for yourself.”

The Spirit of God in Christ is more than we can put in words, and leads us to vistas that we can scarcely imagine.
Amen.