

Sermon for Jan. 17, 2021

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father of us, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

For the text today we're going to look at John chapter 1. This section of our lesson is usually referred to as the call of Philip and Nathaniel. Let us read the text:

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile!" Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

I'd like to review with you the preaching task, for a second. We receive a story from the word of God, and we read it. And the purpose then, of the sermon, is to expound upon the text and make application to our lives. But it's really more complicated than that. It's more complicated than that, because we don't want to lose sight of Jesus Christ and his gospel of the forgiveness of sins.

So, the goal of a sermon is not necessarily to instruct us how to live better lives but to point us to Jesus, the author and the perfecter of our lives. We distinguish between law and gospel, the law showing us our sins and the gospel showing us our savior. And that is fundamental to the preaching task. Just as those who were seeking from the disciples. "Sirs," they said, "We would like to see Jesus."

And as Saint Paul also proclaims to us... "I would know nothing except for Christ and him crucified." To the point where it was once traditional for the crucified Christ --the Corpus Christi--to be hung at the back of the church where the pastor could see it. And the Christus Victor (or the resurrected Christ) or the empty cross would be stationed at the front of the church where the congregation looks at it. The pastor would see the crucified Christ and be reminded to preach the forgiveness of sins while the congregation gazed upon the empty cross in its glory... reminding YOU once again that YOU have been set free from sin.

So, now then let's look at the story we have in front of us and see how all this might happen, in a story like this. So let's begin with a summation. If we were to sum this story up in just a few words, what might we say? Well, the NIV helps us and gives us a title for this section. It says: Jesus calls Philip and Nathanael to be his disciples. OK... THEN, I might ask, why would that be important for us to know today? Is this a big deal? My attention is also drawn to other items in this story, that might be important too... Things I could preach on, that have very little to do with the fact that Jesus is calling Nathanael and Philip to be his disciples.

This is where the Old Testament lesson (1 Samuel 3:1-20) might help us to focus. The Lectionary pairs these stories for a reason. And what do we see in that story? We will see the calling of Samuel. Samuel is not aware who is calling him and Eli has to show him that it is God who is calling him to serve. Well, that helps us

connect the two lessons. The lectionary, at least, gives us a theme for the day which is the calling of disciples. What would that have to do with us? And that seems pretty obvious. We also have been called into God's service.

Now as a pastor, I have been called in a formal way, a public way, to hold an office on behalf of the church. And you also have been called through the waters of baptism into the priesthood of all believers. What exactly is the difference? I like to put it this way for our confirmands: There's very little difference between your call and mine with the exception of my call is to hold an office *on behalf of the church*. That call comes from the congregation. From YOU. It give me permission to do publicly on behalf of the congregation, those things that you as individuals are allowed to do privately in your families and in the world. Specifically, *to share the forgiveness of sins which comes through the gospel of Jesus Christ*. That --you will remember-- is the unique work of the church. You are the church. That's what this institution exists for. To proclaim Jesus Christ. And to share his word and make use of his sacramental gifts. These are the gifts I am to administer on behalf of the people in my office as a public minister.

Now, recall that we are in the season of Epiphany. And so the stories in our Lectionary point us to who Jesus is: the divine one; the God/man; the holy one of God. Remember that Epiphany means "the light goes on." Who is this Jesus Christ? Oh yes... THAT'S who he is! And so recalling the season, let us ask WHY THIS story is being told HERE, at Epiphany?

That could also give us insight into why this is more than a story about Jesus calling a couple of disciples. Just as the story of Eli and Samuel is more than a story about God calling Samuel into the priesthood. In both of these stories, we see something of an epiphany taking place with both Samuel and Nathanael. In both stories we could sum it up this way: A disciple receives a call from God. And their first inclination is the question... WHO is it that's calling me? What does this person want? And in both cases the conclusion is --- THIS is the holy one of God who is calling and asking US to serve in His kingdom.

That is the epiphany, the moment when the light turns on and the disciple says... oh I get it. But I think we can find more in the story even than THAT. I've always enjoyed this story because Nathanael comes across as relatable to me... a real person.

And I think there are quite a few of us, even here, who can relate to Nathanael's sarcastic wit. "Oh so you found the Christ, have you? Okay... and he comes from Nazareth too? OK, right... like anything good could ever come out of Nazareth."

And I'm going to give it up for Philip too, who takes all of that sarcasm in stride, who's not put off by it one little bit, and simply says, "come and see." Because he knows what he will find, and what he will discover, when he actually does meet the Lord.

And I think Philip behaves this way, because this is who Nathanael is. He's sarcastic. All the time. Maybe you know someone like that. Maybe that's you.

Sarcasm means to "bite the flesh," it's a *snappy* way of humor, it's (kind) in a way, but it sure gets its jab in. Yeah, it's meant to be funny, but it hurts... It's too close to the truth.

And I submit Jesus uses it to his advantage against Nathanael. In a sense, I think Jesus --playfully-- bites back when he says... "Behold an Israelite indeed in whom there is no guile."

It strikes me as an interesting word, that Jesus chooses to use here, which we translate "guile" in this case. Literally, it means *bait*. But not just bait... like a worm or something... but it's bait with a hook in it.

I'm tempted to say that what Jesus is really saying here is "Behold one of God's children and who never speaks with any sarcasm." Which if that isn't sarcasm, it would certainly qualify as ironic. Because, indeed, Nathanael does speak with a sharp tongue.

And I think this greeting takes Nathanael by surprise. He reacts to it almost as if he feels like his reputation has preceded him.

"How do you know me"? he asked Jesus. And when Jesus answers him it's like the light goes on in Nathanael's head... "Clearly, I was wrong. You ARE the son of God and the king of Israel."

Nathanael's change of heart is so dramatic it makes me want to laugh. He goes from 0 to 100 in just a second. In one breath he's mocking how anything good could come out of Nazareth and how skeptical he was that Jesus is the Christ, of whom they have been seeking. But now that he's met Jesus, he doesn't appear skeptical at all, but has gone to the extreme, using such names for him as son of God and King of Israel.

And yet some people are like that aren't they? They run hot and cold. They see things in black and white. They are on or off. Does that describe you or someone you know?

Jesus makes a statement here. Notice he doesn't ask a question. What he in effect is saying, is this... to Nathanael. "You were convinced of my divinity by something so simple and unremarkable as my ability to see things far away as if they were close-up. You will see greater things than this. You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Jesus is telling him that the kingdom of heaven will open to him because of what he believes. And so I think the preaching point is revealed...

Likewise, I get to tell you the same thing. That faith in Jesus Christ -- believing him to be who he is, the son of God, who has come into the world to rescue us from our sins -- will open to each of us the kingdom of heaven. In the day and age in which we are currently living in, the times of which we find ourselves now, this is exceedingly good news. Amen.