

Epiphany 2B 2015 Sermon

John 1:43-51

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 about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." 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."

Philip finds Nathanael and says to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." And Nathanael replies, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Nazareth was a small town in the region of Galilee, probably no larger than 500 people in Jesus' day. It is not mentioned once in the Hebrew Bible. Now, in the culture of Jesus' day, origin was destiny, so it is not surprising that Nathanael would question where Jesus had come from. If people of Jesus' day had known modern English, they might have called Nazareth a "hick" town, out in the boondocks; and self-righteous Judeans often looked down their noses at the residents of the whole region of Galilee. And "son of Joseph"? Who in the world was Joseph of Nazareth? In light of his questionable origin, Nathanael probably thought of Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth as a country bumpkin, a hillbilly, a hick, a hayseed, a yokel.

In John's Gospel, the question of where Jesus has come from is a major theme. To have faith, in John's Gospel, is to believe that Jesus has come from the Father, from God. (See John 3:2; 6:46; 7:17; 8:40, 42, 47; 9:16, 33; 12:43; 13:3; 16:27, 30) In the prologue to the Gospel, we have been told that Jesus was the Word who was in the beginning with God, the Word that was God, the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us, whom nonetheless the world did not know or accept. So it is clear to those of us whom John has tipped off in his Prologue that to identify Jesus as the "son of Joseph from Nazareth," as Philip does, is to miss his divine origin, miss what is perhaps the central theme of the Gospel.

I can see in Nathanael's skepticism a parallel to the situation in which the Christian Church finds itself in 21st-Century America. A large percentage of unchurched Americans are asking, "Can anything good come from the institutional church?" What with all the very public scandals surrounding church

leaders and the bad image of “the religious right” as a whole, a large part of America sees the “institutional church” the way Nathanael saw Nazareth: “Can anything good come from it?” How do we counter this perception – we in a mainline denomination which is steadily losing members, we here at Christ Church where our members are dying faster than they are being replaced?

The answer for many Christians over the past several decades has been to make “the case for Christ”, to use the title of a best-selling Christian book. To make the case for the truth of Jesus, as orthodox Christians understand that truth. St. Paul in his letters and the writers of the 4 Gospels are all involved to some degree with making the case for Christ. We Episcopalians have often beaten ourselves up because we “are no good at evangelism”, we can’t quote the Scriptures easily, we are unclear about how to answer the questions of the unchurched skeptics.

But the first chapter of John’s Gospel shows a very different dynamic regarding *how* people come to follow Jesus. Nobody here is “making the case for Christ”. John the Baptist points to Jesus, cryptically calling him “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”, and two of John’s disciples, curious, head off toward Jesus. Jesus asks them, “What are you looking for?”, and they in turn ask Jesus, “Where do you live?” (a question about origin). Jesus answers, “Come and see.” And they follow him. One of these two, Andrew, goes and invites his brother Peter to come and see Jesus for himself. In today’s Gospel passage, Jesus finds Philip and, without using any persuasive evangelical arguments, says simply, “Follow me.” Philip, in turn, finds Nathanael, and in response to Nathanael’s dismissive, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”, Philip does not try to convince or persuade; he simply invites: “Come and see.”

Come and see.

Most of John’s Gospel involves not argument or persuasion, but invitation. The Gospel comprises stories of many different kinds of people *encountering* Jesus in many different situations, with many different responses. Jesus encounters the woman at the well, the man born blind, Mary and Martha, Pontius Pilate, Mary Magdalene. “[A]cross the pages of John’s Gospel,” writes Professor David Lose¹, “there are women and men, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, powerful and vulnerable, people of all shapes and sizes and varieties that Jesus meets. And to each one, in one way or another, he says the same thing: come and see. Come and see God do a new thing. Come and see as your future opens up in front of you. Come and see the grace of God made manifest and accessible and available to all.

“In response, some take up that invitation and follow... And some not only follow but invite others to do the same.

“Come and see.”

“Such easy, warm, and hospitable words,” continues Dr. Lose. “The heart not only of John’s Gospel but Christian evangelism, as we are called not to cram our faith down another’s throat or question their eternal destiny or threaten them with hellfire, but instead simply to offer an invitation to come and see what God is still doing in and through Jesus and the community of disciples who have chosen to follow him.

“But as simple and as non-threatening as these words [‘come and see’] are, I wonder how many of [us] have ever uttered them, or anything remotely like them... to folks we meet in our daily lives.” (*ibid.*)

Let’s face it: most of us aren’t comfortable inviting others to church. And yet research has consistently shown that 80% of people who come to church for the first time come because they have been **invited** by a friend, family member, or acquaintance. It’s not the beautiful building, not the pipe organ, not the style of worship, not the preaching or teaching. The number one reason people give for coming to a church for the first time is that someone invited them personally. Someone said to them, “Come and see.”

“Which means,” Dr. Lose notes, “that the future of the church depends greatly on ordinary, everyday Christians summoning the courage to invite someone to come and see what **they** have found in the community of the faithful that is their congregation.” (*ibid.*) The future of Christ Church depends greatly on each of you inviting someone to come and see what **you** have found in this community of faith.

This assumes, of course, that you have actually found in Christ Church something that is important to you. So I will ask you two questions. First: What is your favorite thing about the life we share in this faith community? I ask you to think about this, meditate on it the next day or so, and then email me your answer. Then ask yourself: “Would I be willing to invite someone I know to ‘come and see’ and share this aspect of our congregational life that I enjoy?”

“In a culture that no longer has a vested interest in encouraging congregational participation,” writes Professor Lose, “the future of our faith communities will, I believe, be greatly determined by our willingness to invite others to share what we have found...

“Christian evangelism... is nothing more or less than inviting people to come and see Jesus, God’s gracious Word made flesh, for themselves. To come and see those who are inspired by Jesus enough to try to follow him. To come and see how God continues to work in the world and in our lives.” (*ibid.*)

“That’s it. Nothing fancy, nothing heroic, and certainly nothing threatening. Just a simple invitation.

“Most of us aren’t very practiced in making that kind of invitation. We worry it will seem inappropriate or even aggressive. But I’m guessing that if you’ve ever been invited by someone to share something they enjoy, love, and value, it hasn’t felt that way at all. Philip *invites* Nathaniel. He doesn’t cajole or coerce or intimidate. He just invites. And we can do the same.

“Perhaps those we invite will like what they find. And perhaps they won’t. Perhaps skeptics like Nathaniel will find something they didn’t expect. Or perhaps they’ll want to keep searching. None of that matters all that much, or at least isn’t up to us. All we’re called to do is invite — *Come and see!* — God will do the rest.”²

AMEN

¹ David Lose, Dear Partner in Preaching, ...*in the Meantime* blog, <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/01/epiphany-2-b/>

² David Lose, ...*in the Meantime* blog, <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/01/john-1-43-51/>