

Epiphany 3, January 21, 2024

JOHN 1:43–51. (EHV)

The next day, Jesus wanted to leave for Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, **“Follow me.”** Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and told him, **“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.”** Nathanael said to him, **“Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?”** **“Come and see!”** Philip told him. Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said about him, **“Truly, here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”** Nathanael asked him, **“How do you know me?”** Jesus answered, **“Before Philip called you, while 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 replied, **“You believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that!”** Then he added, **“Amen, Amen, I tell you: You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”**

Even in this day and age of social media and online reviews, I don't think anything has yet eclipsed the power of word-of-mouth advertising. It doesn't matter how many stars it has online, if someone you trust tells you that's the place to go, you're liable to check it out at least once.

On the way to go golfing one time with a fellow pastor in the area and his church's choir director not long after I was installed at the dual parish I served in Wisconsin, they kept on talking about this country restaurant I hadn't yet heard of, called Schult's. “What is this place?” I asked.

“You've never heard of Schult's?” the choir director asked me. “We'll go past it on the way back.”

So on the way back we took a right off the main county road onto a lesser county road, and then we left the county road onto a country road, which was paved but in much rougher shape than the county roads. As we were driving along, the choir director told me, “You tell me when you think you see it.” Well, I was able to identify it, but that's because they had just put on a new roof, a development that really seemed to disappoint the choir director, who had been bragging about its ramshackle appearance.

This restaurant had one sign advertising its existence on the main county road, and not only was there nothing particularly attractive about the outside, there was nothing particularly special about the inside either. It was maybe a little better than cafeteria seating. But in spite of all that, on Sunday for its brunch buffet—packed. On Tuesday for its Mexican night—packed. On Friday for its all-you-can-eat fish fry—packed. How were they able to get customers like that, in spite of being located out in the country, off the beaten path, with a less than glorious appearance, and with minimal advertising? Here's how: Their food was good, and their customers told other people about it. It was a restaurant not only surviving, but thriving, almost entirely on word of mouth.

In our Gospel for this morning, Philip shows us how word of mouth also works in the Christian religion. We can have a fancy website; we can have a flashy church sign; we can have new paraments and remodeled bathrooms and a well-maintained and well-decorated building. All

of those are good things. But what we really need is a body of members eager and ready to extend the invitation to others: “Come and see!” Let’s first consider the extending of the invitation, and then let’s consider what people experience when responding to the invitation.

1. Extending the Invitation

We’re meeting up with Jesus here on the fourth day in a string of four consecutive days John tells us about. On the first day John the Baptist answered those who were questioning his authority and told them a greater one was coming. On the second day Jesus showed up and John the Baptist said, “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” and he identified him as the Son of God. On the third day, Jesus passed by again and John pointed to him as the Lamb of God again. This time two of John the Baptist’s disciples, Andrew and another one not named but probably John himself, the author of this Gospel, followed Jesus and spent the day with him. And that same day, Andrew also found his brother Simon Peter and brought him to Jesus.

And now we come to the fourth day. We don’t know where exactly all of this took place, except that it was on the east side of the Jordan, outside of the region of Galilee in northern Palestine. Now Jesus decided to leave for Galilee, but he has two more people he wants to take with him. First he himself finds and calls Philip. Philip was from the same town as Andrew and Peter.

But the second person Jesus wanted to take along that day Jesus wasn’t going to seek and find and call himself—at least, not directly. No, Philip, after Jesus called him and after he found out who Jesus was, went to find his acquaintance Nathanael, called Bartholomew elsewhere. He told him, “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.”

Philip already knew for certain that Jesus was the Messiah, the One to whom the entire Old Testament was pointing the Israelites.

But when he told Nathanael that the One to whom the entire Old Testament was pointing the Israelites was Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanael scoffed, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nazareth was a little country town out in the middle of Galilee. Unlike Bethsaida, which was located along the northernmost point of the Sea of Galilee, Nazareth really had no significant water supply. No one came from Nazareth. It would kind of be like if someone told you he knew someone running for president who had grown up in Herrick.

So Philip told him, “Just come and see.”

Now of course Philip was not just saying, “Come and lay your eyes on this guy, and you will be able to tell just from looking at him that he is the Messiah.” No, he was saying, “Come and meet Jesus. Come and talk to him. Come and listen to him.”

Supposedly it was the preacher Charles Spurgeon who was once asked how to defend the Scriptures. He supposedly answered, “How do you defend a lion? Let it loose; it will defend itself.” That is the idea under which Philip was also operating. If Nathanael will just come and encounter Jesus, if he will listen to Jesus’s words, any doubts he has that Jesus is the Messiah will disappear.

Notice what is all at play here, friends. First, you have two people who trust each other. They were probably good friends, but we’re not told that. Maybe they were neighbors who knew

each other well. Maybe they attended the same synagogue. But they trusted each other. We know that, because whatever doubts Nathanael might have had, he went with Philip.

Second, you have one party who is convinced about the truth of Jesus. He is convinced that the Old Testament points to and prophesies about Jesus. He is convinced that, no matter how humble Jesus might look or what humble circumstances he might come from, he is the Messiah and the Son of God. He is also convinced of the power of Jesus's word.

And third, you have a personal invitation, an invitation that will put Nathanael into contact with Jesus's powerful word.

I think today, when we think of "Come and see" invitations, we think primarily of invitations along the lines of, "Come to church with me this Sunday." And certainly that is one way to put people into contact with Jesus. But remember that Philip's chief goal was to put Nathanael into contact with Jesus and his Word. So when we're extending similar invitations, we need to ask ourselves, "Is this the best way to do that?"

In some cases, maybe a formal church service, which is primarily intended for people who already believe, with its sitting and standing, calls and responses, speaking and singing, may make the person uncomfortable from the outset so that he or she has difficulty "seeing," so to speak, that is, listening to and focusing on the message. Maybe in some cases a better "Come and see" would be to have them come over to your house to talk, or go out and grab a cup of coffee and talk, or come and show them a verse you have highlighted in your personal Bible, or to invite them to come and talk in a more private, non-threatening setting with both you and me, or to give them a book to read. And the list could go on.

That's why the bond of trust needs to exist first, the same bond that Philip and Nathanael had. When we get to know others better, not only will we have a better idea of how to extend them the "Come and see" invitation, but they will be more likely to trust us and accept our invitation. Just as Jesus used all of these factors to call Nathanael, so he still uses all of these factors to call others to follow him and become his disciples today.

Build relationships.

Continue to grow in your conviction of the gospel of Jesus.

Extend invitations that will put people in contact with the gospel.

This is a way you too can extend the invitation to others to "Come and see" Jesus for themselves.

2. Experiencing the Invitation

And what will they come and see? What have you seen? What did Nathanael see?

"Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said about him, 'Truly, here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.'"

What exactly is Jesus saying here? The idea is that Nathaniel isn't deceitful or disingenuous. But is that a compliment or is Jesus getting in a little dig? Remember how Nathanael had responded: "Nazareth? Can anything good come from there?" And now Jesus is greeting him with, "Ah, here's an honest fellow." You can see how that might go either way. You guys might get a kick out of the fact that, when I was deliberating the call here, District President Hirsch was telling me about you guys and about the circuit and about the circuit pastor. And he described Pastor Windsperger the same way: "He is a true Israelite in whom there is no guile."

And now, having gotten to know Pastor Windsperger, I'm not sure exactly how District President Hirsch meant that. (By the way, I told Pastor Windsperger I was going to refer to this in my sermon, and he laughed. He isn't sure how District President Hirsch meant it either.) How did Jesus mean it with Nathanael?

Whatever he means, Nathanael is learning something about Jesus. He is learning that even before he says a word to Jesus, Jesus knows who he is. He is omniscient.

Sometimes we want to get away from those who really know us well, but usually that's because we're either uncomfortable with what they know or because they misuse their knowledge about us. But when true friends know us well, that is always a blessing, and we want to be around them.

That's Jesus, friends. Sometimes you have something that you're dying to tell someone, but you don't know whom. Jesus already knows it. Sometimes you're going through something that maybe everyone knows about, but you suspect that no one really understands. Jesus does. Sometimes we maybe don't want other people to know something about us, especially our sins and sinful tendencies, but we need someone who knows them intimately and can provide authentic forgiveness and correction. That's Jesus.

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "Before Philip called you, while you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Jesus is not only omniscient. He's omnipresent. He was standing right there observing Nathanael, while Nathanael was still under the fig tree. People will speculate what Nathanael might have been doing there—he was likely engaging in some sort of meditation or prayer. Perhaps it was even in answer to what he was praying that his acquaintance Philip arrived to tell him about Jesus and to bring him to Jesus.

Jesus isn't omnipresent as some sort of creepy stalker. Jesus is omnipresent to hear us and protect us. He is omnipresent so that we have someone we can talk to about what happened here or there, and we don't have to spend all sorts of time first explaining everything to him. He was there. He knows. When we go into our room and close the door to pray, Jesus is not only standing right there to give us his attention, but it's as if we are the only ones in the universe and he is listening only to us.

"Nathanael answered him, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'" Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is the King of kings, a king who rules everything on behalf of Israel, that is, the body of his believers. He doesn't just see and know; he isn't just there. He's also omnipotent, powerful and able to act on our behalf, able to use his knowledge to help us.

Jesus said, "You believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that!" Nathanael would witness Jesus risen from the dead. He would witness Jesus ascend into heaven. He would see people believe in Jesus as the Son of God and King of Israel even though he was no longer visibly present to give them some miraculous sign. They would believe purely in response to Nathanael putting them in contact with Jesus's word through Nathanael's own mouth.

But Jesus also added, "Amen, Amen, I tell you: You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." It's important to note here that when Jesus adds this, he is now addressing all five of them—Andrew, John, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael. He is talking to them as a body of his followers, his disciples. He might be alluding to

the fact that two of them will later see him transfigured and talking to Moses and Elijah and hear God's voice of approval from heaven. He might be alluding to the fact that some of his followers would have some pretty incredible visions of Jesus, like Stephen, who would see heaven opened and Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father, or like John, who would see heaven opened and Jesus as the Lamb of God standing in the center of God's throne and attended to by thousands and thousands of angels.

We do know that Jesus is alluding to what we call "Jacob's ladder" in the Old Testament. When Jacob ran away from home out of fear of his brother Esau, he slept that night at Bethel and had a dream about a staircase reaching from earth to heaven with the angels of God ascending and descending on it. Here Jesus is basically saying, "I am that ladder. I am that staircase. I am the point of contact between heaven and earth. I am the only mediator between God and man. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the one through whom you can be assured of God's favor and the angels' protection." So Jesus may be referring to what I already mentioned, when people come to faith in him through nothing more and nothing less than Jesus's word. Every time that happens, every time a "Come and see" invitation is extended and results in someone being brought to faith, that stairway is constructed anew and connected to another soul redeemed by Jesus's blood.

But ultimately, Jesus is referring also to what we all will see on Judgment Day, when heaven is opened to us and we see Jesus in all his glory as our mediator and redeemer, with the angels attending to his word and will on our behalf.

Judging from your confession of faith in Jesus, you all will see that blessed vision. Is there someone else you want to see it too? Someone else who needs to see it, because the only staircase following them around right now is one going down, not up? Then stop today, and think of what you have seen of Jesus. It's greater than what Nathanael saw, as gripping as this account is. It's the kind of sight that really is best shared. And it's not like a National Park sight, with an admission cost or other preconditions. Just go and extend the invitation, the invitation through which Jesus makes his epiphany:

Come and see.

Amen.