

January 18, 2009

Epiphany 2

"Jesus Still Calls Unlikely People to Follow Him"

JOHN 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴ Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. ⁴⁵ 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." ⁴⁶ "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip. ⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." ⁴⁸ "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹ Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." ⁵⁰ Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that." ⁵¹ He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

How many of Jesus' disciples can you name? Let's see. There are the big three- Peter, James and John. Then the other well known names such as Andrew, the brother of Peter. We have Philip and his friend Nathaniel also called Bartholomew, and Matthew the tax collector, and Thomas the doubter. There was the infamous Judas the one who betrayed Jesus, and the lesser known disciples with the names of Thaddeus, Simon the political zealot, and James the son of Alphaeus.

What do all these names have in common? They are the least likely people we would pick to follow Jesus. A new president tries to pick the best people possible for his cabinet. Jesus picked unlikely people like fishermen, a tax collector, a political fanatic, a skeptic and doubter to come and follow him.

Do you want even more evidence that Jesus chose unlikely people to come and follow him? Look into the mirror. The face staring back at you is someone Jesus found who was lost. He found you when you were lost and wanted nothing to do with him. In John 15 Jesus says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit." He has chosen you to be one of his followers to invite other people to come along and also follow Jesus.

This week we were amazed to hear the news that a pilot safely landed an airplane filled with passengers on the waters of the Hudson River in New York. What amazes us about that pilot is how well trained he was and how good he was at flying airplanes. What if the person landing the plane had never flown an airplane before? That is what the Lord does with us. He picks unlikely people, inexperienced people, people who are dead in sin to come alive, follow him and then rescue people who are lost. Our job is far more important and even more spectacular than the pilot who safely landed the airplane on the Hudson River.

He finds us when we are lost

It is truly amazing how Jesus finds people who are lost and then makes them his disciples. "The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me." It says that Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. He left the Jordan Valley where John the Baptist was drawing large crowds of people. He went to Galilee, Galilee of all places, described in the prophet Isaiah as a land of darkness. It is there, in this unlikely place that Jesus decided to call his disciples. During the three years they traveled with Jesus the disciples would be known as the Galileans, the hicks and hayseeds from Galilee. The Lord tells us in Isaiah that his ways of reaching out to people are not our ways. "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord."

It says that Jesus found Philip. Jesus finds us, we do not find him. Listen to what the Lord says about finding people in Ezekiel 34:11, "I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock, so I will look after my sheep. I will rescue them from the places where they were scattered." Spiritually dead people cannot come alive and begin following Jesus. He comes to us, he calls us and he creates faith in our hearts to believe. He overcomes the resistance in our hearts and brings us close to him. As we sing in one of our hymns, "Love that found me wondrous thought, Found me when I sought him not."

Jesus told Philip, "Follow me." Have you ever wondered how two little words, "Follow me" could get a man to leave everything and follow Jesus? This is not the first time Philip had been exposed to the Messiah. He tells Nathaniel, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the law, and about whom the prophets also wrote." Philip knew Jesus from the Old Testament with its prophecies about a child born in Bethlehem who would be the mighty God. From the Old Testament he learned about a Savior who would be wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. He probably heard about Jesus from John the Baptist, especially the words, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." The simple words, "Follow me" were all that was needed to draw Philip to follow Jesus and believe in him as his Savior. The words of Jesus are so powerful that they find us, they call us and they bring us close to Jesus. Jesus said, "My words are spirit and they are life."

Philip could not keep this good news to himself. He had to share it with his good friend Nathaniel. "Philip found Nathaniel 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" Can you imagine being one of those people who were aboard that plane that landed safely, and then calling your family to let them know you are safe? Imagine telling the story over and over again about the plane going down, touching the water, climbing out of the water, thanking the pilot. That's what we do with good news. We share it. Philip could not contain the joy he had after learning about Jesus. He had to share it with his friend Nathaniel.

How does Nathaniel receive this good news? He is skeptical, a real tire kicker. "Nazareth, can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Nathaniel knew that the Lord had promised the Savior would come from Bethlehem, not Nazareth. He knew the Old Testament said the deliverer would come from Zion. Nazareth, even the name means "a little shoot" or "twig town" could certainly not be the hometown of the Messiah. He measured what his friend

was telling about Jesus. He checked it out with what he had learned in the Scriptures. What he heard about Jesus from Nazareth did not measure with what Scripture said of Jesus coming from Bethlehem. Oh, dear Christians, if only we would always evaluate what we hear and whatever we see going on in our lives and in the church in these last days with what we read in the Bible as Nathaniel did.

How does Philip handle his friend's doubts and skepticism? He does not want to start a religious argument. He probably doesn't have the answer himself at this point in his life on why Jesus would come from Nazareth and not Bethlehem. He simply says, "Come and see." There may be times when the best invitation for the skeptic is the simple invitation, "Come and see." Come and see Jesus, and how much he loves. You don't need classes in witnessing to share the simple truth, "God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life." The Lord finds people who are lost by using unlikely people like Philip and us to simply say, "Come and see."

He fills our lives with his glory

Nathaniel listened to his friend and came to Jesus to check him out. Notice how Jesus approaches Nathaniel, seeks him out, speaks to him, and then helps him see his glory. "When Jesus saw Nathaniel approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite in which there is nothing false." Because Jesus is a God from all eternity he is able to look into the hearts of people and see how true and honest they are. Psalm 139 says of the Lord, "You know my when I sit down and when I arise. You are thoroughly acquainted with all my ways." Everything that ever goes through your mind, even for a split second, awful thoughts that someone has said would shame hell itself, are fully known to our God.

Jesus saw in Nathaniel a man who was honest, who was not trying to cover up his sin, and make himself appear better than others by his actions. Jesus said Nathaniel was an "Israelite" in whom there was no deceit. He sees him as someone who is honest in life, not trying to deceive and cheat others, and not playing a smoke and mirrors game with God as so many were doing at Jesus time. Jesus said of the Pharisees, "They honor me with their lips but their heart is far from me." Becoming a Christian and being born again means that you become honest, real, and truthful about who you are, and how far you have fallen from God's glory. Were you honest with yourself this morning when you started this worship service by confessing your sin before God? Are you still trying to cover up secret sins in your life, are you holding on to things that you know are wrong, and you are not being honest with people around you, with yourself, and your God? God knows your heart and he knows mine. We cannot hide from him. How much sin can we get away with? The honest answer is none. Nathaniel was an honest man who knew he needed help.

Nathaniel asks Jesus, "How do you know me?" Jesus shocks Nathaniel even more with the words, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." Whatever that moment was, and whatever thoughts he had under the fig tree, Jesus taps into them and says, "Nathaniel I saw what was going on inside of you." Nathaniel responds immediately by saying, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel." Charles Colson in his book "Born Again" describes what it was like to read the Bible and check out all the references to Jesus, and become convinced he was God from all eternity. John 20 says, "These are written that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,

and that by believing we may life in his name.”

And then Jesus tells Nathaniel that he would see even greater things than these. “You shall see greater things than these..” “I tell you the truth, you shall see the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” Jesus is taking Nathaniel back to the time when Jacob the cheater and deceiver slept with his head on the stone, and had a dream of a ladder going up to heaven with angels ascending and descending on that ladder. God had a message for this cheater Jacob who was troubled by his sin and the damage he caused to his family. It was a message that heaven was open to him, his sin was forgiven, and he had peace with God. Nathaniel would see the miracles Jesus did and even see the nail prints in his hands the night of his resurrection. They would see in Jesus that heaven was open and they had peace with God through Jesus. Your eyes of faith are privileged to see the miracles in Jesus’ life. You are privileged to see great things this morning. With a little bread we receive the body of Christ. With a little wine we receive the blood of Christ. Angels rejoice to see what we are privileged to see and believe with our eyes of faith. We are such unlikely recipients of God’s grace, beggars, sharing with other beggars, Jesus, the bread of life. Amen.