

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 18, 2009
Epiphany 2
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

I Samuel 3:1-10
Psalm 63:1-8
I Corinthians 6:11-20
John 1:43-51

Our Gospel lesson today introduces us to an enigmatic figure who is part of an intriguing story. This week and next week we will witness Jesus invite various persons to follow him and to become his disciples -- persons such as Andrew and his brother Simon (Peter), James and his brother John, and Phillip from the town of Bethsaida.

These persons are mentioned in the other Gospels, but the man whom we meet today is not, or at least not by the name used here. Some scholars believe that Matthew, Mark, and Luke refer to this man as "Bartholomew," but here in John's Gospel he is known as Nathanael. He hails from the village of Cana, just 8 miles or so down the road from Nazareth, the hometown of one with whom he is about to have an amazing encounter.

The text tells us that the day after Jesus finds Phillip and invites him to be a disciple, Phillip sets out to find Nathanael. When he finds him, he tells him: "we have found the Messiah. We have found the One of whom the prophets have spoken. His name is Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth."

And immediately there is a big disconnect for Nathanael. For Nathanael knew full well about Nazareth, having grown up only a few miles down the road. Nazareth was a tiny, nondescript, podunk village with a very bad reputation. Anyone who knew anything knew that only ne'er-do-well's and no-accounts came from Nazareth. This was a little, one-camel town with a Roman military garrison, and little else. To speak of Nazareth was to speak of a place of ill repute, a place known in biblical times as an "ungodly place."

So Nathanael immediately has a problem. Phillip has found him and is excited to tell him that he has found the Messiah, and that he is from *Nazareth*. But Nathanael checks his mental grid for a second, and his perceptual filter tells him that what Phillip has told him simply is not possible. Of the many things that might come from Nazareth, nowhere does a Messiah appear on the list.

In fact, the thought is so ludicrous that Nathanael does not even maintain his decorum. In snide and snarly fashion, he responds: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

(I can picture Nathanael, hunched over with laughter, saying to Phillip, "excuse me, but I thought I just heard you say that the Messiah has come from Nazareth? That's so rich, that's a good one. The only good thing ever to come from Nazareth was an empty bus, and you're saying the Messiah is from

Nazareth?” Then, when Phillip is silent, Nathanael says: “Oh, my God, you’re serious, aren’t you?”)

Isn’t it amazing how sometimes we can be looking at something directly in front of us, and yet not see it? Isn’t it amazing how so many times what we *see* is determined by what we are *looking for*, and what we are looking for is colored by what we think we already know?

Blind spots. Prejudices. Perceptual filters. Nathanael was not the only one to suffer from these maladies. We have them, too. Oh, how we have them in our world today, especially when it comes to this person we call Jesus.

Try telling a coworker whose life is a mess and who is searching for answers that Jesus might be what she is searching for, and see what kind of response you get. Try telling a wayward child that the peace he seeks might be found in Jesus, and see what happens. Try telling the neighbors across the fence how Jesus has changed your life, and watch their eyes glaze over.

If you offered them something from the latest self-help book, or quoted them something from the latest in ancient Eastern metaphysics, you might get a hearing. But Jesus? Not a chance. The Son of God, the Light of the world, has come into our midst. But all we can see is a carpenter from Nazareth.

That's all Nathanael could see. That's all his prejudice would allow him to see when it came to Jesus. But fortunately for Nathanael, his destiny did not hinge on his ability to *see*, but on the fact that he *had been seen*.

As Phillip brings Nathanael to Jesus, Jesus says of him, "here comes an honest man, a true Israelite."

Incredulous, Nathanael responds, "how do *you* know about *me*?"

"I saw you under the fig tree before Phillip found you," is Jesus' reply.

In bible times, most families lived in crowded, one room houses. Often times a fig tree would be planted on the property as a place of retreat and escape. Fig trees grew to about 15 feet high, and the branches could spread as far as 25 feet wide, creating an umbrella-like space that was almost like a private room. Perhaps Nathanael had retreated to his fig tree for quiet reflection, and Jesus had spotted him there.

But whatever it was, a dramatic shift occurs in the narrative at this point. A complete shift and a dramatic reversal occurs between verses 48 and 49. The directional change is so significant that I feel as though a big part of the story has been omitted. Up to this point, Nathanael has been the one who has seen only what he has wanted to see with respect to Jesus. He's got his blinders on; he's looking at Jesus through his prejudiced lenses. Jesus is from Nazareth, and we all know what that means!

But suddenly here in verse 49, Nathanael is throwing out divine titles for Jesus: “Teacher, you are the Son of God, the King of Israel.”

Wow. How is it that this man has moved from rejection to praise? How did doxology suddenly replace cynicism? Where did the scales fall from his eyes? How is it that Nathanael can now truly see Jesus for who he is?

The answer comes in Phillip’s response to Nathanael’s earlier question. When Nathanael asks, “can anything good come from Nazareth?” Phillip does not argue with him. Phillip does not engage him in debate. Phillip simply says to him, “come and see.”

Come and see. Nathanael was drawn to Christ and won to Christ not by an argument, but by an *invitation*. His prejudice, his spiritual blindness, was not overcome with theological persuasion or apologetic debate, but with an invitation to a relationship. Nathanael comes to see clearly only because he has first *been seen*. He comes to know fully by learning that he is *known* fully.

I am convinced from this story that whether it’s our neighbor across the fence, or a wayward son or daughter, or a coworker in crisis, or even ourselves, that the missing piece to the puzzle of life which we seek is found in this simple invitation: *come and see*. The truth, the meaning of life which we seek, will not be found in tightly woven truth claims between the covers of any book, but in a

relationship with a carpenter from Nazareth. At the heart of the Gospel is this simple, yet profound, invitation: *Come*.

In the fellowship hall next to the little church that Connie and I attended as teenagers was a painting. The artist was Holman Hunt, and the painting depicts Jesus standing outside a closed door and knocking. Connie and I were always taught that the painting revealed Jesus knocking on the door of our hearts, asking us to let him in. I later learned that this painting was rather famous, and the original hangs in St. Paul's Cathedral in London.

But after reading again this week the story of Nathanael and his encounter with Jesus, let me ask you a question. What if, in the painting, Jesus is not knocking on the door and inviting himself *in* -- but instead knocking on the door and inviting us to *come out*? What if he is inviting us into relationship, inviting us on a journey of discovery where he lovingly wants to rob us of our blind spots and show us not only who we are, but who we can become?

Come and see. Those words are addressed to us directly from the Holy Spirit this morning. And the Spirit is at work even now helping us to respond to that invitation, because when we do we discover that Jesus has had his loving eye on us long before we turned our gaze toward him.

There is yet one final invitation for us to “come” this morning. It is the invitation to come to the Lord’s table. It is yet another place of encounter with the Christ who sees us and knows us, and who loves us as his sons and daughters.

So come with faith. Join the ranks of those like Andrew and Peter, James and John, Phillip and Nathanael. Throw caution to the wind. Open the door of your heart, step out, and follow him. You will never be the same again.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.