

Hearing the Call

John 1:43-51

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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."

I like the story of the young woman who wanted to go to college, but her heart sank when she read the question on the application blank that asked, "Are you a leader?" Being both honest and conscientious, she wrote, "No," and returned the application, expecting the worst. To her surprise, she received this letter from the college: "Dear Applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower."

John chapter one introduces a number of people who kept talking about Jesus. John the writer of the book we are reading was one of those. This entire book is about Jesus first, last, and always.

He couldn't be clearer: Christianity, eternal life, heaven—are all based on what you know and think about Jesus. Some religions require an intimate knowledge of rituals, ceremonies, or philosophies and laws. Christianity is about a person. Those who would point others to heaven must point to a person—Jesus Christ. In theological terms, we call this incarnation! God in us!

Andrew was one of the first to follow Jesus. Once convinced that Jesus was the one he had been waiting for, he immediately found his brother Peter and brought him to Jesus. Andrew would never be the bright light that his brother would be among the Apostles, but Peter might never have known Jesus if his brother hadn't insisted on talking about Jesus.

This brings us to Philip. Jesus invites him to join him on his road trip to Galilee. But note what Philip does first. He finds his friend (some Bible scholars think he was a cousin, perhaps even a brother) Nathanael and tells him about Jesus. Nathanael is the focus of our study today.

Philip a brand new disciple. He may not even have half understood what he believed yet. But he knew Jesus was the best thing he had ever heard of. Jesus was simply too good to keep to himself. He couldn't help himself. He had to talk about him. He had to tell his friend.

The gospels agree on a crucial point. It is not enough to believe, one must be a follower!

Interesting, it is most often new followers of Jesus who are the most effective and most enthusiastic about telling others about Jesus. This is true for a number of reasons. New believers still have more contacts with those on the outside. Often, they haven't yet gotten their faith all cluttered with opinions and traditions. They find it easier to keep the main thing the main thing. But most importantly, they haven't yet come to believe that other people aren't interested. After all, they were interested.

Oh, Lord, give us more Philips. What a difference it would make in this church and in this town, if more people were so impressed with Jesus that they couldn't help talking about him! Oh, how we need men and women and teenagers who love their friends and family so much that they want more than anything to bring them to Jesus. It doesn't take a lot of learning, education, or experience. The only real requirements are a love for Jesus, a love for our friends, and the kind of faith that believes no one is beyond the reach of God's love.

Nathanael was a Jew from Galilee. He probably was a fairly knowledgeable student of the Old Testament. When Philip invites him to meet Jesus, he appeals to his knowledge of prophecies about the Messiah. But the most obvious characteristic of Nathanael was his skepticism. In fact, he probably could have qualified as a "Missourian." Show me first, could have easily been his motto.

Did you catch his first response to Philip? His friend says, "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} Nathanael then asked, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"

Some think that Nathanael understood the Old Testament so well that he knew the Messiah had to be born in Bethlehem, not Nazareth. So if Jesus was from Nazareth, he couldn't be the Promised One.

But it seems more likely that there was some sort of prejudice or stereotyping going on. Maybe Nazareth had a reputation. Perhaps Nazareth High was the big basketball rivalry to Cana in the All Galilee Conference. If you were from Cana, you just couldn't say anything good about anybody from Nazareth. You know how it goes.

Our perceptions can keep us from encountering God!

Whatever the reason for Nathanael's dim view of Nazareth, the story doesn't end there. It is what happens next that I really want you to see today:

First, Jesus has time and room for skeptics and doubters. We tend to act like having questions or doubts is a sign of weakness. It can be, but not always. Let's face it, if we are

honest, we all have doubts. If we didn't we would be so gullible that we would be an easy target for every snake oil salesman that came down the pike. Followers of Jesus are not called to have blind faith that believes anything. We are called to be tender hearted and tough minded. The Bible tells us to "not believe every spirit, but to test the spirits".

Jesus never scolds anyone for questions or honest doubts. He welcomes the opportunity. He can reassure any doubt honestly held. He is not afraid of any question. He is the truth; he holds the truth; and welcomes all who seek the truth.

If you are here this morning because your wife drug you to church (and anybody can see you heel marks in the street outside, if they look) or because your parents said you either go to church or you can't have the car next week or you are here for any other reason—but you don't really believe what's being said—I am serving you notice today. I don't consider you an "unbeliever;" even though you don't believe –yet! In my book, you are a "pre-Christian!" It is just a matter of time and Jesus is going to get you on his team. Even if you don't believe in Jesus, yet; he believes in you!

Our big problem today is not so much unbelieving "sinners," but unbelieving Christians who have ceased to believe that Jesus can reach anyone, no matter how skeptical or full of doubt.

A new believer was standing outside after church one Sunday when a veteran member noticed he had tears in his eyes. The older member asked what the problem was. "I just started thinking about all of the lost souls out there. There are so many people who need the Lord and we seem to be having such a small effect on them!" The veteran sought to console the new comer. "Don't worry. After you have been here a while, you will get over it." He responded, "Yes, I know. That's why I am crying!"

Nathanael wasn't like that. He had his doubts. Maybe he was suspicious and skeptical by nature. But he apparently read and studied his Bible. He was looking for answers. He wasn't just using his doubts to hide behind. When invited to come and see, he came!

If you have doubts but are an honest doubter, you can do no better than what Nathanael did. He kept searching and asking God for answers. He looked in the right place—God's Word. He hung around the right people—those who believed. And when invited to come and see, he came to see!

Jesus actually prefers honest skeptics who are willing to "come and see" over "tag-alongs" who talk a good talk, but who aren't really on board. Jesus likes honest skeptics because he knows their heart.

There is an interesting and puzzling conversation between Jesus and Nathanael. "**How do you know me?**" Nathanael asks, perhaps with a bit of suspicion. Then Jesus says I saw you under the fig tree. That doesn't make much sense to us, but most Bible scholars think there is something special going on. A fig tree has important meaning in Jewish thinking. In fact, the rabbis would often use the phrase "being under your fig tree" like we might use the idea of "a prayer closet" or "quiet time." To be under your fig tree, literally or figuratively, meant to be in a time of prayer,

meditation, and Bible study. Maybe Jesus was saying to Nathanael, “I saw you praying. I heard your questions. I know you are seeking God’s truth.”

Whether or not that is exactly what Jesus is saying, the Lord does know our hearts . . . from beginning to end. Before, during, and after our prayers, he knows our heart’s cry.

I realize this isn't true, but I believe Nathaniel's middle name could have been Tebow! 43% of American's believe that God is leading Tim Tebow in his victories for the Denver Broncos. Well, it was 43% until last night!

I do need to make one thing clear! God does not take side in ball games! God is much more concerned about how we live our lives and are we working to build his Kingdom.

I say that Nathaniel's middle name could be Tebow because we see how Jesus greets him. “Here is a true Israelite in whom there is nothing false.” The KJV uses the quaint phrase “in whom there is no guile.” It describes a person of integrity. What you see is what you get. No pretense, just honesty.

Tebow, a noun, has now become Tebowing, a verb. To offer public acknowledge of God. And in typical American style, this public acknowledgement is being met with ridicule and derision at every level. I happened to see the overtime victory of the Broncos over the Steelers last week. Immediately after the winning touchdown Tim Tebow took a knee acknowledging God in his life. But ridicule was soon to follow. As the Sports Center cast signed off, they all gave the Tebow impression of chin on fist! It was a typical display of ridicule.

The point I want to make that **if you are going to be a true follower of Christ, the world will not always understand or accept your faith.** You too, will be subjected to derision and ridicule.

If you have doubts that you struggle with, if you don’t have everything all figured out and tied in a nice bundle, but you really would like to find out what God has for you, then you have come to the right place and to the right person. Jesus delights in revealing heaven to honest skeptics. This is probably the heart of Jesus final words.

He promises Nathanael answers and to even bigger questions than he has now. Jesus refers to Jacob’s dream of ladder with angels coming and going to heaven in Genesis 28. He claims that he is the one who makes such revelations of heaven come to pass. As his follower, Nathanael will come to know and understand such things.

The same is true for any honest skeptic who comes to the Lord seeking answers. If you come, doubts and all, and are willing to learn, listen, and eventually obey, there is no limit to what God has for you.

Conclusion: I don’t care if you are skeptical about religious matters or if you are religious and often find yourself skeptical about skeptics, you can learn a thing or two from Nathanael and Jesus. Doubters, you can bring yourself, doubts and all to Jesus. Come and see. He will love to

give you real answers to honest questions. On the other hand, if you tend to doubt if skeptics can ever find Jesus. Don't worry about it. You don't have to wait until the people around you have no more doubts before you talk about Jesus. Jesus doesn't have any doubts. You just talk about what you have found, invite them to come and see, doubts and all, and Jesus can deal with the rest.

This Jesus asks us to follow him. To follow and see him tell us that disease, sickness, is not what God wants for man, that man cannot please God through some kind of rigorous and meticulous watching for possibilities of stepping over lines drawn by man, that God has to suffer and to die to bring peace between God and man, to give us the assurance that even though he died and was buried and we bury our dead, there is life after dark days of death and there is this Jesus coming for us.

Follow him! Take up your cross and follow him! Go his way of service and love and thus follow him. Know that it will cost you everything, even your life, for finally you will have to commit your life to God, as Jesus did and trust him to wake you up again.

And you will see the angels surrounding him in glory when he comes to take you, his follower; home. Until that time, tell people what you deeply care about and that they should come and see what you have found, after being found by Jesus himself.

That's what it means: to follow Jesus!

Resources:

esermons.com

Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2

Walter W. Harms, The Text This Week

Dr. Roger W. Thomas, First Christian Church, Vandalia, MO

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