

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, January 14, 2018
2nd Sunday of Epiphany/Lectionary 2/Proper 7/Year B
Primary Text: John 1:43-51
Sermon Title: “*Speak, For Your Servant is Listening*”

Theme

In John’s gospel, Jesus’ ministry begins with the call of disciples, who then bring others to Jesus. Philip’s friend Nathanael moves from skepticism to faith when he accepts the invitation to “Come and see.”

Text

⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip 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.” ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” ⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” ⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” ⁵⁰Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹And 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.”

Sermon

The context for the gospel reading is a time of expectations! John the Baptizer had come on the scene and partly because he was so unusual, eccentric, and downright weird, he attracted a lot of attention. But at the same time he was a very gifted and dynamic preacher driven by the Holy Spirit of God to prepare the way of the Lord – prepare the way for God’s Messiah who was to come after him. This week we have jumped to John’s gospel and what has been left out which I think is critically important is the confession of John the Baptizer. He was in Bethany with of couple of his own disciples when he spotted Jesus and shouted out, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

One of those disciples was Andrew. Now let’s think about this for a moment. Andrew was a disciple of John’s. Many of us have never thought about John having disciples because John was not the real deal! Right? John himself said I am not the one you are looking for with great expectation. I have my place and it is to prepare the way for him, but I am not the real deal.

If you were a faithful God-fearing Jew and you knew this guy John was just ahead of the Messiah, wouldn’t you think about being his shadow? And that was what Andrew did. But when John pointed out the Messiah, and said there, there is the real deal, Andrew and the other disciple left John and followed Jesus. The first disciple.

Andrew had a brother whose name was Simon Peter. Andrew went to his brother and said “We have found the Messiah!” Andrew took Simon Peter to Jesus and he became the second disciple.

Then we get to today’s reading. Jesus moved on to Galilee and found Philip, the third disciple. Philip found Nathanael and said, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Can’t you just feel the excitement in his voice? “We have found the Messiah! He is here in our midst!”

Nathanael yawned and replied, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Nathanael tried to be a buzz kill but Philip was too excited. But rather than try to convince Nathanael based on his experience of Jesus, he said, "Come and see." "Don't take my word for it, I have only just met this man and already my life is changed and I am going with him, so that I might learn from him."

There is some more interesting dialogue that went back and forth between Jesus and Nathanael but it ends up that Nathanael is also convinced and also becomes a disciple; the fourth. And here comes the point I want to make. Are you ready?

Lives are changed when people encounter Jesus. (Repeat)

How else can you describe what took place in this story? There will eventually be the official twelve disciples, and others as well, but when honest God fearing people look into the eyes of Jesus something happens and otherwise mature adults leave their parents, their fishing nets, their occupations, and whatever else they were doing - and they follow him.

(Pause)

I wish I knew what you are thinking right now. I wish I knew if you:

- ever thought about it before,
- agree with me,
- wish for a transformative experience like that for yourself,
- or, if you have had one, and that leads me to wonder, why don't I know that about you?

Do you even believe this kind of transformation is possible – today? After all, we cannot look into the eyes of Jesus like Andrew, Simon Peter, Phillip and Nathanael.

That's true. But we have something that is even more powerful than the physical presence of Jesus (if you can even imagine that). When the Son became God incarnate in the person of Jesus, he limited himself to a single place and time, same as you and me. But after his ascension, he gave us the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is not limited to a single place and time. It is with us now in this place and will accompany us all day even after we leave, just as it did yesterday and will

tomorrow. The Holy Spirit is the spiritual presence of Jesus Christ and if we seek him, he will find us.

Some may be thinking, “I’ve been coming to church for years and have never really “got it”.” If that is what you are thinking, I simply say, I understand. I have experienced periods of dwelling in the wilderness too. It is frustrating to me too, but when I examine my own life, the times I felt *far from God* are the times when I turned my back on God and godly living.

I took the sermon title from First Reading because I think it demonstrates a childlike innocence and compliance. Eli was the chief priest in those days and he had grown old and complacent and should have retired. And because the priesthood was a family business in those days, his sons were priests too. But they were corrupt and stole from the LORD. Eli knew this but in his state he did nothing about it.

Samuel not a priest but just a boy who was given to the LORD to serve the Temple. The story is much more interesting than I am telling it, but Samuel slept on the floor in the Temple and one night he heard the voice of the LORD and because but it was unfamiliar to him and so he naturally thought it was Eli. But Eli knew, and said “The next time you hear that voice, say “Speak, for your servant is listening.” Oh that we all heard the voice of the LORD so clearly. Oh that we would all so obedient.

Think back with me on this gospel story; there was an encounter with Jesus and then he asked something of them (namely, to drop everything and follow him) and they were obedient and followed him! You see, there must be something transformative about an encounter with Jesus – a real spiritual encounter with Jesus.

But it seems not to be that way for everyone, and that is a puzzlement for me. The scripture indicates that John had at least two disciples, one of them being Andrew, the other remaining unnamed. It is pure speculation on my part but I suspect, that that unnamed disciple remained faithful to John, or just got burned out, or served his term on council and fell among the inactives – we will never know. But one thing is certain, he missed out on the biggest event in human history – an encounter with Jesus Christ.

I suspect he never got it, never had the opportunity to look into the eyes of Jesus, or if he did, saw nothing but guilt and judgment instead of love and grace. It works like that too. There are several encounters recorded in scripture where the other simply walked away. Or he or she simply could not believe this most unlikely story. But for those who believed and risked and responded like Samuel, and Andrew, and Simon Peter, and Philip, and Nathanael, it has made all the difference.

To be completely honest with you, not much is known about Andrew and Nathanael, or many of the other disciples. But we read about them today and still admire them for making the right decision.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

What's your story? Do you find yourself in this story? Have you heard the voice of Jesus? Were you like Samuel and said, "Speak LORD, for your servant is listening?" Or did you blow it off like to Nathanael nearly did?

Every day we have the blessing of waking up and asking ourselves if we believe this stuff. And whether we do or whether we have a moment of weakness of faith and don't, we should pray to almighty God that we encounter the Holy Spirit of the living Jesus Christ today. For it is in that encounter that lives are changed – ours and those around us.

Prayer

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ, most merciful redeemer, for the countless blessings and benefits you give. May we know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, so that our lives are transformed and we may be your faithful disciples. Amen