

Genesis 28:10-22

John 1:43-51

January 14, 2018

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

SEEN BEFORE SEEING, KNOWN BEFORE KNOWING

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

Here is a poem for this second Sunday of Epiphany, written by Jan Richardson, artist, author, and United Methodist minister. It is called "Known: A Blessing."

First
we will need grace.

Then
we will need courage.

Also
we will need
some strength.

We will need
to die a little
to what we have
always thought,
what we have allowed
ourselves to see
of ourselves,
what we have built
our beliefs upon.

We will need this
and more.

Then
we will need
to let it all go
to leave room enough
for the astonishment
that will come
should we be given
a glimpse
of what the Holy One sees
in seeing us,
knows

in knowing us,
intricate
and unhidden

no part of us
foreign
no piece of us
fashioned from other
than love

desired
discerned
beheld entirely
all our days.¹

Nathanael had “to die a little to what he had always thought, what he had allowed himself to see of himself, what he had built his beliefs upon.” When Philip invited him to “Come and see,” Nathanael was quick to voice his skepticism based on what he had always thought, what he had allowed himself to see of himself, what he had built his beliefs upon – “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Granted, Nazareth was a back-water, little village in Galilee, but even so, Nathanael’s immediate reaction seems rather harsh. But, to his credit, Nathanael went anyway. He went to see what Philip was talking about. As one commentator has put it, “Nathanael is skeptical at the start. His initial attitude towards Jesus is based on his preconceptions and his contempt for Nazareth, from which he thinks nothing good can come. However, his actual experience of Jesus changes his mind.”²

This story from the first chapter of John seems to be the perfect model for effective evangelism. Are you shy about sharing your faith? Just say, “Come and see.” You don’t know how to invite someone to church? Just say, “Come and see.” Are you unsure about how to answer skeptics or people who are wondering and seeking? Just say, “Come and see.” There’s no need to threaten or to embarrass or get defensive or condemn or reject. Just say, “Come and see.”

There is certainly some value in that lesson from this story about Jesus, Philip, and Nathanael. Philip makes the same offer to Nathanael that Jesus made to him, “Come and see.” Although we don’t know a whole lot about Philip (his name appears in every list of the twelve apostles), he does seem to have a knack for introducing people to the Lord – first with Nathanael, then with some Greeks later on in John’s gospel. Some Greeks in Jerusalem for the Passover festival found Philip and said, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. (John 12:20-22) Unfortunately, John doesn’t tell us if the Greeks ever got to see Jesus, since Jesus starts talking about his upcoming death. But is it too hard to imagine Jesus saying to Andrew and Philip, “Tell those Greeks to come and see”?

But this isn’t a sermon about evangelism or how to invite someone to church or how to defend your Christian faith, even if the simple “Come and see” is an attractive way to invite someone to share the joy you have found in Jesus. No, I’m more

interested in how Jesus finds Philip and already knows Nathanael, even before either one of them goes looking for Jesus.

John begins his story by telling us that “Jesus decided to go to Galilee.” John doesn’t tell us *why* Jesus decided to go to Galilee. However, the very next thing we read in the story is, “He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’” “Being found” keeps on happening throughout the story – Philip “found” Nathanael and told him, “We have ‘found’ him about whom Moses in the law and the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” That reminds me of the story about Jesus and Zacchaeus the tax collector. According to Luke, “[Zacchaeus] was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.” (Luke 19:3-4) After he had eaten at Zacchaeus’ house, Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.” (Luke 19:10) Zacchaeus wanted to *see* Jesus – Jesus *saw* Zacchaeus, sought him out, and saved him.

Which takes us back to Nathanael’s question for Jesus, “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.”

Think about what we say when the light bulb goes off, when our eyes are opened, when we understand – “Ah, now I see!” We’re not just talking about light entering the pupil, being bent by the cornea, being focused by the lens, which projects the image onto the retina, which then converts the light to electrical signals and sends them to the brain. No, we’re talking about “seeing with the heart” -- perceiving, understanding, recognizing, experiencing, and coming to see.

Seeing and knowing – that’s what Philip and Nathanael experienced that day in Galilee. But even before they saw and knew, they were seen and known. Before Nathanael even responds to Philip’s invitation, “Come and see,” he is seen. Before Nathanael even gets to know who Jesus is (more than just a nobody from Nazareth), he is known. Nathanael’s experience with Jesus reminds me of some of the most beautiful words in the scriptures: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” (1 Corinthians 13:12)

At yesterday’s session retreat, the elders and I spent the morning talking about how we can fulfill the responsibility of discerning and measuring the congregation’s fidelity to the Word of God. We also talked a lot about helping the congregation define our vision of who we are and who God wants us to be. We talked about working together with the congregation to create a new vision and mission statement that expresses who we are and who we want to be as God’s people, and what we will do to help people “Come and see” who Jesus is.

In an article about this story about Jesus, Philip, and Nathanael, Stephen Hultgren writes, “If we are convinced that Christian faith holds the truth about human life, then we must, in all earnestness, show people how that truth makes sense and is embodied in our own lives, both as individuals and as communities . . . Thus faith also comes about when people see communities – families, churches, and even larger

communities – living out, in unity, the truth of the gospel and offering people a coherent vision for life.”³

One minister asks, “Who was your Philip? Who invited you to ‘come and see’ Jesus – the first time and the many times since? And what are your ‘Nathanael’ moments – those times Jesus connected with you so profoundly you’ve never forgotten it?”⁴

Philip and Nathanael moments – that’s what the elders and I hope for for our congregation. How can we all experience those times Jesus connects with us so profoundly that we will never forget it? How can we better see and know Jesus? Even more than that, how can we come to trust in our heart-of-hearts that even before we see and know Jesus, Jesus has seen and known us?

I began this sermon with a poem by Jan Richardson about being known. Here’s a poem to end with, by Andrew King, called “The One Whose Heart is Searching.”

Nathanael on the ground
under the fig tree, looking

up through its leaves at
an empty sky.

The leaves sift the sunlight,
its harshness is filtered,

but the shade over his soul
shows little gleam of joy.

His heart nearly closed
in its quest for truth,

his horizons have dimmed,
no corners of hope discerned.

But there is One who
remains watching and looking,

and the One who is searching for him
is the unrecognized God.

You and me on our beds,
our couches, you and me by our lamps.

You and me under spreading trees,
or peering at the sky through windows;

you and me at our office desks,
fingering the plastic of keyboards;

you and me in our living-rooms,
or sitting at our kitchen tables;

you and me, so yearning for hope,
so longing for meaning, truth, or joy –

may we become aware of the One
who is searching for us;

awake to the One
who knows and calls our names

longing for us to listen:
the God of promise and of invitation.⁵

Let us pray: Come, Holy Spirit, that we may see and taste the grace of God afresh. Come, Holy Spirit, that we might share the grace of God with others. Come, Holy Spirit, that we might bear witness with our whole lives to the grace of God made manifest and available to us in Jesus. Amen.

NOTES

¹Jan Richardson, “Epiphany 2: Known, A Blessing,” from The Painted Prayerbook at www.paintedprayerbook.com.

²Stephen Hultgren, “Commentary on John 1:43-51,” at www.workingpreacher.org.

³Ibid.

⁴Rev. Janet H. Hunt, “It Seems Like It Should Be So Simple . . . So, Why Isn’t It? Looking Ahead to the 2nd Sunday after Epiphany: Some Thoughts on Philip, Nathanael, Jesus, my hairdresser, and invitations . . .” at www.words.dancingwiththeword.com.

⁵Andrew King, “The One Whose Heart is Searching,” January 12, 2015, Poem for the Sunday Lectionary Epiphany 2, Yr B at www.earth2earth.wordpress.com