

Pastor's Message – 1/17/2021
John 1:43-51

"Not a very promising crowd," the preacher thought to himself, looking out over the pulpit. Only a handful had turned out to hear him speak -- even though he had traveled all the way to Scotland from South Africa.

The preacher's name was Robert Moffat. He was a missionary. That night, Moffat's "mission" was very particular: to find men, and bring them back to Africa, to the mission field.

Women, he wasn't especially interested in (this was the early 1800s, after all). The preacher would thank the women for their prayers and good wishes, but most everyone agreed that the hardships of Africa were not for members of "the fairer sex."

Yet, the fairer sex was all Robert Moffat had that night: and only a handful of them at that. To make matters worse, his pre-arranged text was Proverbs 8:4, "Unto you, O men, I call."

Moffat raced through his sermon, finishing early: trusting God to make something of it, somehow. When it was over, he departed: to the usual round of polite handshakes and smiling thank yous -- but not a single recruit to show for his efforts.

Or so he thought. Moffat had no way of knowing it, but his words that night would make an enormous difference in the history of Christian mission.

Unbeknownst to him, there was a man in the sanctuary that night -- well not a man, exactly, but a boy. High up in the choir loft he sat, waiting for the sermon to end, so he could do his job: pumping the bellows of the pipe organ with his feet.

As he waited, young David Livingstone could not help but listen to the preacher's words. It seemed as though they were directed to him alone.

Years later, by then a young man, David Livingstone would train as a doctor, and pack himself off to the most uncharted regions of Africa as a medical missionary and explorer. It was he whom Charles Stanley of the *New York Herald* would seek for months, and finally discover on the shores of Lake Tanganyika -- greeting him with the immortal words, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?"

All this took place because, one blustery Scottish night years before, a boy had listened -- had listened and had heard -- in church.

This Sunday and next, the gospel reading offers stories about Jesus calling people to become His disciples. How the call comes, and how different persons respond, is different for each person. This week we hear how Jesus called Philip and Philip called Nathanael to discipleship to Jesus. Jesus called Philip to be His disciple and Philip was so enthusiastic about his newfound Lord that he ran to Nathanael with the news that he had found the Messiah promised in the scriptures. Nathanael was skeptical but Philip persisted. "Come and see" (v. 46).

The invitation to us during these two weeks is to do likewise: hear the call of Jesus to become his disciples and invite others to join us in this journey. We see the call to discipleship in its very simplest form in Jesus' call to Philip in verse 43. "Follow me."

The good news cannot be contained. Christians are not called to convert anyone; that's the Lord's job. Our call is merely to share what Christ means to us and to invite friends and neighbors to come and see for themselves.

What, then, should disciples expect? Why would we answer this call?

Disciples should expect lots of ordinary life, to be sure. To follow a person as a disciple means you are with that person most of the time. And most of the time, most people, including Jesus, are doing fairly ordinary things, like walking, or driving, or eating, or sleeping.

The call was not, "Become a preacher." Nor was it "Change the world." The call from Jesus was to follow Him. The call from Philip was to join him in following Jesus. In both cases, it was a call to come and get to know Jesus. It was a call to learn how he lived and to learn to do the same.

But who is Jesus, and what does it mean to each of you who call yourself a follower or disciple? At some point, every person has to answer that question. Today's Bible reading invites us to consider our own response to Jesus' invitation to "Follow me" and to reflect upon why we know him as our Lord and Savior.

The Gaithers have a song that declares, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus: there's just something about that name!" The name Jesus comes from the Hebrew name Joshua, which means "God saves." But Jesus is not the only name by which our Lord is known. The gospel writer John presents a string of other names by which the man from Nazareth is identified: "the very person Moses and the prophets wrote about!" "Son of Joseph from Nazareth," "Rabbi," "Son of God," "King of Israel," and "Son of Man." Each name on the list identifies something about the person, role, or character of our Lord.

But of course, there is more to this story than simply a name. There may be something about that name, but it wasn't just hearing a name that inspired Philip and Nathanael and the others to leave their homes and their families and their jobs to go on a journey with Jesus. Something more must have happened that day. What do you think it was about Jesus that caused Nathanael to want to "come and see" for himself who this man was and what he was saying?

What was it about Jesus that prompted you to want to "come and see" who he was? What happened that caused you to be curious and want to learn more? Where were you and what were you doing when you sensed Jesus picking you out of the crowd or spotting you under the fig tree? What enabled you to not just hear, but to respond to his invitation to follow him? What made you decide to answer his call on your life in the way that you did?

I would like to have you take a minute or so and think about the moment you realized that you had received an invitation – had heard a call from Jesus. Sometime this week, share your story with someone else or call me or email me. I'd love to share stories with you.

The wonderful thing about Bible stories like this one today is they give us the opportunity to share the story of our own call to follow Jesus. Every person's story is different, and each one needs to be told! It is not only pastors or missionaries like Charles Stanley, who have a call story. Every Christian also needs to tell their stories. This is what we call "witnessing" in the church, and it is the job of every single person to witness to others about their decision to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Even the call to discipleship is not entirely a call we offer entirely as individuals. Philip did not say, "I am calling you to follow Jesus." He said, "We have found the very person Moses and the prophets wrote about!" (verse 45), and ultimately it was an encounter with Jesus himself (just as Philip had had in a different way) that led him to "come and see" what Jesus and discipleship to him were really all about.

In the late 1990s, the Lutheran church conducted a poll, and although it was in the late 90's and a long time ago, the numbers are still pretty close to accurate, in which researchers asked lots of Lutherans how it was that they had happened to come to their particular church in the first place.

Here are the replies:

2-3% joined because of denominational identity (longtime Lutherans, obviously);

5-6% joined because of a particular program or church event;

3-4% joined because of the preaching/worship life;

A whopping 80% said they joined the church because a friend or family member invited them, and the guest at that church could see the importance of faith in the friend or family member's life.

Jesus' gracious, gentle invitation is "Come and see." It's extended to every one of us, all the time. Always we are invited into closer relationship with him -- but the invitation is often extended through another person, taking the form not only of words but also example.

We call others to "come and see," to come and meet Jesus in us and in our church. But who is the Jesus who we show to others? William Coffin, Chaplain at Yale University for eighteen years, often encountered much skepticism about God not just from young students but also from his colleagues -- professors at the university. When some of these professors would mock religion in his presence he would invariably ask them, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in." Coffin knew that 99 chances out of a 100 he wouldn't believe in their kind of God either.

In a culture where large percentages of our communities have little interest in attending a worship service, either in public or on-line, are you providing people with other opportunities to "come and see" what God is doing in the world and in their individual lives?

Jesus offers something far out of the ordinary when he invites disciples. "I tell you the truth, you will all see heaven open and the angels of God going up and down on the Son of Man, the one who is the stairway between heaven and earth."

Angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man echoes the story of Jacob encountering God in a dream (Genesis 28:12). In the dream, the angels ascended and descended upon a ladder—the pathway from earth to heaven and heaven to earth. Here, Jesus indicates He Himself is that pathway, and his disciples will come to know this.

"Heaven open" meant that the existing world order was being broken into and invaded by God. Discipleship to Jesus involves becoming able to see God breaking into this world and God's kingdom encountering and upending its powers in real time. It means we get to see what others so easily miss—that this world, as it is, is deeply broken in ways that only God can (and will and does!) restore. It also means we get to be witnesses and partners with the inbreaking kingdom of God.

Do we expect to see the skies split and angels all around? That is exactly what Jesus tells these first followers to expect and what many Christians through the ages have come also to expect. Do you expect this? How are you inviting others to expect this?

We need to recapture that sense of amazement at the presence and power of Christ in our lives. We can do so in many ways, both ordinary and extraordinary. All throughout today and tomorrow when we wake up there will be numerous ways to be amazed at the power and presence of God in our lives. The mere fact that we are still alive should prompt a prayer of thanksgiving, especially when we realize that many will die without seeing another day.

Sensing the weather is another way to appreciate the amazing power of God. We might see a beautiful sunrise, feel the warmth or the cold of the air, or hear the call of morning birds. God's creation is all around us; we should be amazed. As we prepare for the day ahead, we might eat breakfast, read the paper, or watch or listen to the morning news on television or radio. Each of these activities is possible, in the end, as a result of the amazing power of God.

Next, some of us will travel to work. After our arrival, we work long and hard and then make the return trip home. How often in our day will we consider the amazing presence of God all around us? While much human effort is present, the energy, technical ability, and opportunity that generated what we have, comes from God. Yes, God is present in the miraculous, as when Jesus amazed the crowds with physical cures and his ability to control nature. But God is equally present in the routine, ordinary, and even mundane events of everyday life. God is present in our successes and joys, but the Lord is equally present in our failures and pain. God is present in every moment of every day; we must open wide our senses in order to perceive, experience, and fully appreciate what God does for us each day.

Day-to-day life can, however, numb our senses to God. Too often the only thing that seems to shake us from our lethargy of experience is something that is truly extraordinary, positive, or negative. Again, we must find ways to recapture the excitement and energy for life and most especially for our relationship with God. We must take the necessary time to find God in our daily lives and we must be intentional about it. We seldom, if ever, take the time to reflect upon life and how the amazing power and presence of God can be found in it. Thus, today we must overtly strive to discover God's presence in our world. In essence, what we must do is empty out space in our lives so they can be filled with God's presence which comes to us in so many miraculous, as well as seemingly ordinary, ways.

One of the interesting details of our Bible story today is the surprisingly funny first response of Nathanael when he says, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" At first, Nathanael doesn't recognize Jesus for who He really is. He considers Him only in terms of His human origins, as the son of Joseph of Nazareth. Then he is able to recognize and follow Jesus, the Son of God. Each one of us in this Church has the opportunity to move people from just recognizing the humanity of Jesus to a place where they recognize Him as the God who came to earth to save them and the world.

Some have made New Year's resolutions and some have already forgotten those resolutions, but we have today a New Year's resolution for every disciple. The season of Lent will be upon us in just over a month, Ash Wednesday is February 17, and some folks still give things up for Lent. American theologian Leonard Sweet tells about an evangelist named Sam "Golden Rule" Jones who had "quittin' meetings" for those who were converted at his revivals. These meetings were designed to get people to confess their sins (cussing, drinking, gambling, and so on) and then have everyone pledge to quit their sinning.

It seems that at one of these meetings, a lady was asked what she was going to quit. She said she hadn't been doing anything and was going to quit doing that. Maybe it's time for us to quit doing nothing, too!

This Bible reading from John today serves as a reminder that not everyone responds to the gospel invitation in the same way. Philip was an early responder. Jesus said, "Follow me," and Philip did. Nathaniel, on the other hand, responded to the invitation with skepticism and sarcasm. Not everyone is going to jump at the invitation immediately. This story reminds us that even if someone doesn't accept our invitation at first, we shouldn't give up on him or her.

Consider Philip's response to Nathaniel as well. He doesn't try to convince him with brilliant apologetics. He also doesn't get angry or defensive. Philip simply invites Nathaniel to "come and see" for himself. Philip understands that it isn't his job to convert Nathaniel. Only Jesus can do that. He is just called to share what he's experienced and offer an invitation for his friend to experience it himself.

You will see greater things than this," Jesus says, "heaven open ...the Son of Man." Jesus' call to disciples invites believers to see God in the day to day and in the greater things that are yet to come.