

Come and See!

Second Sunday after Epiphany
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

I Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The advertisement that Trinity Lutheran Church occasionally publishes in the Faith section of the Harrisburg *Patriot-News* often has this sentence: *Come Worship with Us!* Then we list the variety of services for the week, and sometimes add an item about a special event, such as a concert. But the ad remains fairly simple and straightforward, doesn't it? *Come Worship with Us!*

When we print an ad like that, we're like Philip in our Gospel lesson today. For what was the response Philip gave to Nathanael when Nathanael questioned whether Jesus was anybody special at all? Philip said, "Come and see." Come and see. That's really where sharing our faith begins. We invite people to come and see.

John here records a story of Jesus seeking out and calling a few of his disciples. First, Jesus finds Philip and says to him, "Follow me." We don't learn much about the interior mind of Philip here, about whether he hesitated a moment or jumped right into discipleship without thinking twice. But we do learn from John Philip's next act. Philip goes and finds Nathanael. Philip confides to Nathanael he has found the one of whom Moses and the prophets of old have spoken. It's a little amusing—Philip thinks he's found Jesus, when it's clear from the start, Jesus found him. But anyway, Philip tells Nathanael Jesus fulfills scripture that tells of someone who will be sent from God to save his people. Philip says it's this Jesus, the son of Joseph of Nazareth.

And boy, for a minute there Philip almost had Nathanael convinced. Until he said Jesus was the son of Joseph of Nazareth. Such an ordinary man from an ordinary family and an all-too-ordinary town. In Nathanael's humble opinion, what good, what holy thing or person or act could possibly come out of Nazareth?

Philip could have stopped right then and there and not said anything else. Figured Nathanael's mind was made up, so why waste his breath? Or, Philip could have launched into a long theological treatise, quoting Isaiah and Micah and Jeremiah, with footnotes and addenda as proof text that Jesus was the promised Messiah, setting up an extended debate with Nathanael. Or, Philip could have laboriously detailed his own personal moment of conversion—where Jesus was standing, what the weather was like that day, what Jesus said, what Philip replied, and then what happened next, etc., etc., etc. Instead, Philip says, "Come and see."

And maybe that is by far the best, first thing to say when meeting up with someone who is skeptical of Jesus . . . or skeptical of what the Church has to say about Jesus . . . or skeptical about the Church.

Look, there are many folks—and you and I are acquainted with them—who consider Jesus an intriguing, even admirable historical figure, but they do not agree with our confession that “Jesus is Lord.” They have trouble with the words of the Bible, as well as the variety of, and nuances in, interpretations of that Bible. They question the truth of doctrines of the Church that have stood for centuries, some of which are voiced by you and me each week in our creed. And they know of, or perhaps have been part of, congregations that seem to act in ways wholly contrary to Jesus’ ways. It is no wonder they are skeptical. It is no wonder they say we’re hypocrites. The Church has often been less than loving and compassionate, less than welcoming, less than merciful, less than courageous in the face of evil, less than honest in calling its members to the real commitment and potential for suffering in discipleship.

And so the skeptics say, “What’s the point? What’s the Church’s purpose and reason for being? What’s this Jesus fellow got to do with my life, my world? Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Well, what should you and I do when we hear that? Do we drop the discussion, change the subject? Do we launch into our own particular and maybe peculiar theological understandings, pulling up pieces of scripture from here and there, trying to *make faith happen* in that person? Or do we enter into an extended debate with them, trying to, as one commentary put it, “argue them into the kingdom”? Do we start telling our life story, ending up with a laundry list of things we’ve done, and things this congregation itself has done over the years? We **could**.

But maybe we should simply say, “Come and see.” Maybe that’s the way to begin sharing our faith, and really open up the possibility of radical new life for the skeptic before us.

You have to admire Nathanael. At least he’s honest. A little blunt, maybe too blunt. But honest about how he just doesn’t get it—he just doesn’t understand how this human being named Jesus could be anything other than an ordinary human being. Nathanael just doesn’t understand how Jesus could be the Son of God, or why Philip would be interested in following Jesus. You can’t necessarily blame him for not feeling any compulsion to get up off his behind under that fig tree. Maybe he’s been disappointed too many times in life. Maybe he’s just reining in his hopes and dreams, tempering his expectations a little bit, being realistic. Why, it would be the joke of the century, Nathanael would split a gut laughing, if God really worked **that** way—coming in a lowly, ordinary, unassuming human form (from Nazareth, mind you) to bring in his powerful and holy and glorious kingdom.

Philip says “Come and see.” That phrase itself is something quite nearly as unassuming as Jesus, son of Joseph. It’s a simple invitation to meet him.

And so Nathanael meets Jesus. Now, their conversation is rather enigmatic to scholars. Certainly enigmatic to me! Scholars suggest Nathanael gets the gut feeling that this Jesus somehow knows him. Others think Nathanael senses Jesus’ genuine love for him. Whatever happened between them, Nathanael is changed. He is moved to confess Jesus as the Son of God and the King of Israel. From skeptic to believer—why, it happened in the blink of an eye! Had

Philip tried to offer a theological treatise to move Nathanael to faith, he'd still be back in the first verses of the book of Genesis!

It is the presence of Jesus that removes the offense of the incarnation, removes from Nathanael's mind the idea that God come down in human form is simply too ridiculous an idea to entertain. It is something about Jesus. The moment Nathanael meets Jesus . . . well, suddenly, Jesus as God becomes plausible, possible, true for Nathanael.

But, wait, there's more! And that's pretty much what Jesus says to Nathanael. He says, "You ain't seen nothin' yet!" Jesus tells Nathanael he will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Now, I realize that's a rather enigmatic statement, too. But the hearers of this Gospel would understand—and so would Nathanael—that this was a reference to the Old Testament patriarch Jacob, who once had a dream about a ladder to heaven with angels climbing up and down it. This story can be found in the book of Genesis. You probably remember the spiritual "We are Climbing Jacob's Ladder," which references the same Old Testament story. With these words, Jesus is telling Nathanael that, should Nathanael stick with Jesus, he will see his Lord's glory when he is resurrected from the dead. He will witness the Risen Lord, and, by virtue of simply being in the presence of this ordinary and very human Jesus, Nathanael glimpses heaven. This ordinary and very human Nathanael experiences the kingdom, **encounters God**.

Come and see. That's really the place where sharing our faith begins. The Church—you and I, each of us here—invites and welcomes others to come and see. Because we believe Jesus meets us here, as he promises, when we ordinary and very human people give thanks and sing praise, listen to his word, and feast on his meal. Jesus meets us here when we demonstrate his love, follow his path of service, bring healing to the broken, and embody in our own lives Jesus Christ and his life-giving ways. As those things happen, all who are invited to come and see, see **him**. **AMEN**.