

"The Simplest of Invitations"

Second Sunday after Epiphany – Lectionary 2
5:30 p.m. Saturday, January 14, 2012
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

John 1:43–51

Well, today we deal with good, old Nathaniel. In a way, he's the mystery disciple of the New Testament. His name doesn't even rate a mention in the other three Gospels. Only in John do we hear about the disciple with the seemingly parochial ideas about Galilean towns.

Picture, if you will, our man Nathaniel. He hails from Cana, another in a long line of undistinguished little hamlets in the Galilean region. Actually, the whole of Galilee is more or less a backwater region, noted mostly for a small lake, frequently called, in a bit of an exaggeration, the Sea of Galilee. Within this rather dull little province were equally dull little towns. Jesus was from one of them – Nazareth. Nathaniel from another – Cana. The two were ten miles apart.

So, here is Nathaniel, a rather ordinary young man, with all the hopes of any young man of his time. One day, he is minding his own business when his friend, Philip, approaches all excited. "We've found the Messiah, the one we always heard about and hoped for!" he fairly shouts. "He's here among us at last, the one we've waited for so long!"

Nate is cautious and skeptical. Could it possibly be? After so many centuries, will this great thing happen? With his heart pounding, he asks the obvious, "Who is he? Where did he come from?"

Philip blurts out the embarrassing reply, "He is Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph!" Before the words had finished tumbling from his mouth Philip could see Nathaniel's countenance fall. It did sound flat, even to Philip. Why couldn't it be David of Jerusalem, or Elijah of Miami, some place exotic? Why did it have to be Nazareth? And a tradesman's son at that.

Nathaniel scowled for a moment. Fiddled with his sneakers. Pushed his glasses back up on his nose. Turned around and continued with his current task.

Philip waited. His presence seemed to say to Nathaniel, "Well, what about it?"

So, finally, Nathaniel looked back at him. "Jesus of Podunk? So what? Can anything good come out of Nowheresville? Let me tell you three things about Nazareth, Philip.

"First of all, it is a very small town. What this country needs is someone from some place important, someone who can make the Romans sit up and take notice. Nazareth? It's *nowhere*! No one is going to pay any attention to anyone from there.

"The second thing is, my home town is twice as important as Nazareth. Our football team beats theirs every season, and the fat cats of Jerusalem don't even know we're on the map."

"The third thing is, and this really says it all, Nazareth isn't even mentioned in our scriptures, Philip. How do you expect a Messiah from some place that is not even mentioned in the whole of our Torah and prophecy? No, Philip, you've not found the Messiah -- just another dreamer like yourself. A son of a carpenter who ate too much pepperoni one night and had a dream and thought he had seen God. That's all. I'm sorry to break the news to you, but I'm afraid that's the way it is."

I picture Philip standing there staring at his own shoes for a moment or two, perspiration running down his back. He couldn't argue. Nathaniel's prejudices and biases, his view of what the Messiah should be, didn't include a carpenter's son from little, obscure Nazareth. Philip also knew that he didn't possess the gift for instant analysis that Nathaniel did, so he knew that if he tried, he'd never argue him into seeing it his way. So, he just said simply and plainly, "Come and see." And to everyone's surprise, Nathaniel went. And not only did he see, he followed.

This brings us to the centerpiece of this call narrative – that simple, yet commanding invitation: "Come and see." Let me offer, in keeping with the simplicity of Philip's words, one observation and then one commentary or implication of those words for us.

First, the observation. It is the simplest of invitations, is it not? It doesn't require the speaker to explain, to defend, to argue, nor to debate. Just, "come and see. Come with me and see for yourself. Come along and make up your own mind. Come and let Jesus speak for himself. Come and be your own judge. Come and see."

Even Lutherans, who are afraid, normally, of anything that even remotely sounds like "evangelism" can make this offer. After all, we don't want to sound like we're too enthusiastic about our faith, like some others we know. We proudly wear the moniker of the "Frozen Chosen."

But even we Lutherans can say simply, "come and see," to our neighbors and friends and folks we care deeply about it. Come and see. Meet Jesus here through his Word, read and proclaimed each week. Come and see. Hear the stories of his life; listen to his life-lessons through his timeless teachings. More importantly – come and see. Watch his death on a cross and know it is for you. Come and see, my friend.

Come and see his grace in the forgiveness and acceptance we all know and experience as we meet Jesus through the sacrament of his body and blood in the bread and wine shared with other pilgrims. Come and see; experience the love, support and caring that comes from his Body, this church and its wonderful people, who seek, however imperfectly, to embody Jesus' love and ministry in this community and in the world.

"Come and see." Nathaniel forgot about his prejudices and preconceived notions when he did, for what he saw and what he experienced changed his life forever. Through his coming and seeing he entered into the greatest adventure of his life.

Such a simple invitation, is it not? So easy to say. And for those of us who have come and have seen, we know how life-affirming, how life-altering, how life-changing it can be. We

can take a lesson from Philip here. Evangelism is not about arguing anyone into belief. It is not about having enough knowledge that we can debate another about the merits and benefits of faith. It is not even about knowing enough to persuade. It is about believing that the invitation itself is enough, for the rest is, and always will be, up to God.

And here is the implication of this invitation – it is not what we bring to this journey, or where we have been or come from that’s important. It’s where we end up – in the arms of a Savior. The journey for some may begin in the depths of despair; at the bottom of a deep well with all other options and avenues tried and failed. It may begin on the lap of a parent who brought us here week after week and from whom we learned to sing the liturgy, and sit and listen to the words of preachers, and to pray our prayers in community with others. It may begin with questions and doubt; with reluctance and dragging of feet as we are told, “you will come and see!” It may begin with the soul in turmoil and the mind in confusion and a life in tatters. It may even begin without any perceived needs at all, but just a longing that can’t find expression anywhere else.

It doesn’t matter how or why or when we come. It’s where we all meet that is important, and that is at the foot of a cross, around a table with a common meal, listening to words of hope and courage and discovering here a love that will not ever let us go.

“Come and see.” Maybe those words should be painted above every church’s every door. And for those that do come and see, we offer a word of gracious welcome and hospitality, and encourage them to hear the words of grace that can change their lives and an invitation to join Jesus’ in ministry.

Back in 1960, when I was just beginning to hear God’s call in my life, there was a painting that caught my imagination. It became an important image to me. It was Holman Hunt’s famous painting of Jesus standing outside the fast-closed door of the believer’s heart and knocking. The original of that hangs to this day in St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, and, when I did my semester abroad, I had the chance to see it. But back in 1960, I saw it in a devotional book, cut it out, and had it pasted over my desk. Most interpretations of that painting have Jesus knocking and asking to be invited in. But after hearing the story of Nathaniel, I think there is another view to take. What if we looked at that painting and see it not as an invitation for Jesus to come in, but as Jesus inviting us to come out and go with him into the world where ministry and healing and good news need to be shared?

Jesus knocks and, when we answer, says, “come and see. Your sins are already forgiven. Your past, no matter how sordid, your present, no matter how confused, means nothing to me. Come and see. Let me walk with you for the rest of your life and into the next.”

How can we refuse?

AMEN.

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