

Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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The summer after we moved into our house in Bay View, Judah and I were out on a walk around our block enjoying the weather. We hadn't met a ton of people just yet, but as we made the final steps back home, we noticed another dad and his son playing outside on their front lawn. We got to talking pretty easily, and the dad, who never really knew a stranger, invited our family over later that day to play and hang out some more. Just like that. He barely knew us, but he welcomed us in. I still remember how over the course of the afternoon, the weather changed from a typical summer's day to pouring rain, and us running the 10 house stretch from us to them as quickly as we could. In my mind, we were laughing all along the way. And that first hang out, in their living room, in cozy couches and chairs, blossomed into a deep friendship. The other dad, Joe, and I have spent countless hours with our two sons as we were both stay at home parents for a while. Picking them up from school, going to playgrounds, play dates, a Brewers game. And of course there were more hang outs in the living room. Unfortunately, Joe had a tragic heart episode, and he passed away a year ago this past December. There was a hospital visit and honor walk before Joe gave his vital organs, and a beautiful celebration of life. And through loss and grief, our friendship has continued to grow. Just the other night, Joe's partner and son were over for dinner, and I swear I saw a little 6 year old Joe rounding the corner as the boys played. And all of this, the friendship, the mourning, the life, all of this began because of a simple invitation on a front lawn one summer day. A simple invitation to come over.

These kinds of invitations have the ability to shape and change our lives all the time, and in so many different ways. Whether it's a first date, applying for a new job that starts you on a completely new path, or an invitation to join friends for a meal that pulls you out of yourself just a bit. The power of invitation can set things in motion we never knew laid beyond our yes.

In today's Gospel, we find Jesus walking around in Galilee, and we have this shockingly quick scene wherein Jesus simply utters two words to Philip, "follow me", and apparently Philip does. Immediately Philip goes to find his friend Nathanael and tells him, "we've found him! We've found the one the prophets and law have been pointing to. Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." And Nathanael responds with kind of a gut response: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

Commentator Audrey West points out that we don't know much of anything about Nathanael.¹ His appearance in the Gospels are limited to one other account, and so we don't necessarily have a wealth of information to draw on as to why Nathanael would say this. So commentators would suggest one possible explanation is that prevailing expectations didn't place the Messiah

¹ West, Audrey. "Commentary on John 1:43-51." *Working Preacher from Luther Seminary*, 20 Dec. 2023, www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-john-143-51-6.

coming from a small town of Galilee like Nazareth.² It was thought the Messiah would come from somewhere more prestigious like Jerusalem or Bethlehem. Look at the Wise Men from Matthew's Gospel. The first place the figure they should check out in looking for Jesus was, well, Jerusalem.

Whatever the motivation for Nathanael's response to Philip's invitation, it's clear (as commentators would point out) that Nathanael isn't convinced. He's doubtful, unsure, and just plain skeptical. His response is more of a "Sure, I guess I'll go" than an excited "no way, are you serious?!" Because the truth is, as Audrey West mentions, this is a story about God accepting us and meeting us where we are as we navigate the life of faith; suspiciousness and uncertainties included.³ So if you find yourself along a similar path as Nathanael, you're not the exception to the rule, or included by accident or mistake. You didn't slip in the back door without notice. You are in the family, central to the story, beloved by God. Because despite what our fears or the fears of others might believe, Jesus doesn't reject us for our doubts. He welcomes us.

And the same is true, not just for Jesus, but with Philip as well. Philip doesn't get all belligerent and defensive. He doesn't bust out his Hebrew Scriptures and take him to school. How does Philip respond to Nathanael? With the simplest of replies: "Come and see." That's it!

Now, I feel like I'd be doing all of us a disservice if at this juncture I didn't bring up the scary word that I'm betting many of us are squirming in our seats over, and it's not fornication or prostitution. Especially if you've grown up in the church, and grew up in, let's say, less than ideal places to learn about this scary word. Some of us grew up with people imagining some gruesome scenes when talking about this scary word, and so rightly so, we became very uncomfortable with the very idea of engaging with this word. Others of us grew up with a profound feeling of guilt, compulsion, or obligation whenever this scary word was discussed. Still others of us grew up believing that in order to do this scary word the right way, you had to know all the right answers, and, moreover, you had to get other people to accept and believe those same right answers, otherwise it was all for nothing. Maybe some of us, in a past life, went door to door, or stood on street corners for this word. I'm talking about the word evangelism. And I wonder. If we allowed the Spirit to sift our hearts this morning, and we tried to notice what emotions and feelings come up and why, I wonder what would be revealed. I know for me, I resonate a lot with the above. If I felt anything about this scary word, it's fear, anxiety, mixed with an "oh heck no" response.

And I have to say, as I've been praying through the gospel this week, I have been deeply encouraged by Philip's approach here. There's no hint of forcing Nathanael to jump through hoops, or pray a certain prayer just so. There are no theological proofs offered in this

² Hoppe, Leslie J. "Second Sunday after the Epiphany, John 1:43-51." *Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary.*, edited by David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2008, p. 262.

³ West, Audrey. "Commentary on John 1:43-51." *Working Preacher from Luther Seminary*, 20 Dec. 2023, www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-john-143-51-6.

conversation (see a different approach in Acts with the Ethiopian eunuch⁴). Philip's approach is probably the simplest evangelism approach I've seen, maybe ever. And to be honest, there are probably a lot of church professionals and researchers that think his approach to "reaching your target demographic" is grossly undercooked and not thought through nearly enough. I can just hear it, "What do you mean? He's just gonna say - come check it out? That's it!?" What about the graphics? Or the wording? Should we start a Tik Tok?" All Philip does is say three words to Nathanael: "Come and see." He just offers an invitation. And then let's Jesus do what Jesus does.

Now I'm not going to guilt you into doing evangelism this week. That's not me. Hard pass. I'm not going to ask you to write the names down of three people you can engage with this week. But I am going to ask us to sit with the Spirit on this one, and linger a bit on this idea. How might the Spirit guide us in tenderly unpacking this in our lives? How might we work through the baggage we carry when it comes to this? And then what are the simple invitations we can make? How might we lovingly extend invitations, and mirror Philip here and not balk when it's met with frustration, doubt, or hesitation? And, then, how might we be surprised when we let folks meet God on their own terms, and watch the Spirit at work? Because we never know what God will do with just three words. Amen.

⁴ Brown, Elton W. "Second Sunday after the Epiphany, John 1:43-51." *Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary.*, edited by David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2008, p. 262.