

“Come and Behold the Unexpected!”

John 1:43-51

Second Sunday after Epiphany

January 17, 2021

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

Our text, Philip responds to Nathanael’s cynicism, “Come and see.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Two themes from last week’s text will help us meditate upon this week’s text, so let’s give a one or two sentence review: Last week, we heard (first theme) that, while Christmas points us to the humanity of the Christ, Epiphany points us to the divinity of the Christ. Secondly, we heard that Jesus’ baptism was different than our baptism because his baptism certified him as the Messiah of God, and – in our baptism – that same Messiah attaches us to himself and, by that baptism, gives us the new beginning as children of God and gives us all access to the great inheritance of the new creation.

Those themes focus and bolster our appreciation of this morning’s text, which promises us access to God through the Messiah whom He has sent. So, let’s consider:

Our text begins simply enough: “The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee.” But, in those words is a great theological truth that, sadly, much of American Christianity has failed to see. “Jesus decided,” it says. Or, in the Greek, “Jesus willed it.” That may seem inconsequential, but so much of American Christianity teaches the

Christian faith as if Jesus is a stationary Messiah, sitting idle on his throne and just waiting – because that’s all he can do – just waiting for you to come and “make your decision” for him. But Jesus is not just waiting... it’s his will to go to Galilee because it’s his will to call his disciples and begin his ministry and start putting ‘flesh and bone’ on that great promise of God’s will to save His people from their sins... just as it had been God’s will, God’s proactive posture, God’s desire to enter the garden and continue coming to man, calling out, “Adam, where are you?” even after Man had ruined his perfect paradise with God.

Never ever fall into the false-religion trap of thinking that Jesus is stationary and idle and just waiting for you to show your fervent faith before he’s willing to be gracious and merciful. To be sure, he calls you to repentance and will not forgive the impenitent until they repent; but his call of the Holy Law is just as proactive for your benefit as is his call of the Holy Gospel for your benefit. No, Jesus is no lazy, stationary, or reactive God. Instead, “He wills;” “He decides,” indeed, “He finds.” Just as the parable of the shepherd going and finding the lost sheep, what does our text says of Jesus deciding to go to Galilee? “He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’”

Now, before we go further, let’s make sure we know what it means that Jesus said, “Follow me.” American Christianity will interpret this, “You see? Jesus gave him an invitation, and one must

first *choose to accept the invitation* before Jesus can be his Savior.”

Not true. Jesus says elsewhere, “You did not choose me; I chose you, and I *appointed* you to bear fruit.” Jesus appoints, which is certainly no mere invitation. Jesus chooses; again, no mere invitation. Jesus saves, no mere invitation. So, what does He mean when he says, “Follow me.”

In Rabbinic custom (recall, they thought of him as “Rabbi” or “Teacher”), in Rabbinic custom, the mantle or yolk of the teacher would be placed on whomever he picked for his would-be disciple, and he would say, “Follow me.” This was an expectation that the would-be disciple would follow and learn from him. Thus, the phrase in our text, “Follow me” is no mere invitation, but *expectation*. Philip is not expected to say, “Thanks so much for the opportunity; let me think on it and get back to you.” No, instead Philip knows instinctively, “this One is to be followed.” And, in his joy, Philip goes and finds Nathanael, in hopes that Nathanael, too, might be chosen by Christ to follow him... that Christ might graciously overcome Nathanael’s cynicism and make him beneficiary as one who follows.

Friends, isn’t this exactly what you’re doing when you bring family and friends to the things of God? You are not wowing them and trying to sell them on the Gospel. You are not trying to entertain them and convince them that the Gospel will be ‘fun.’ You are bringing them to Christ with the fervent prayer that this one be taught, that he/she too may follow... and, if they refuse to be taught,

well then, they do not have the privilege of carrying his yolk, his mantle, as He has called, “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me... for [“in Me,” he says] you will find rest for your souls.”

This is what Philip wants for Nathanael, and he goes to him and says, ‘Nathanael, we have found him of whom Moses in the Law and all the prophets (remember, back then they didn’t know to call it the “Old Testament” – they just described it as “Moses in the Torah and all the prophets wrote”)... and that Messiah of *whom* they wrote, that Christ promised from Genesis 3 until now, that One is fulfilled in the person of: Jesus of the town of Nazareth.’

Nathanael balks: “Nazareth! Can anything good come from Nazareth!” Understand that Nazareth was frowned upon as sort of a lower-class, backwoods type of a place. Nathanael’s remark is the same as if someone stereotypically referred to “hillbillies” or, as we sometimes hear our coastal media refer to middle America as “fly-over country.” Likewise, Nathanael says, “Nothing worthwhile can be found in this area of Nazareth.”

And Philip responds, “Come and see.”

That’s a wonderful phrase here, packed with more meaning than what we realize in the English. In verses just above this, when John the Baptist pointed the first two disciples to Jesus and they asked where he was staying, Jesus responds with the more generic invitation we’d consider when hearing the words “Come and see

(οραω).” But, just verses later, on this occasion, the phrase is totally different, “Come and *ιδε*,” meaning “Come and behold the unexpected!

This is what you are saying to your family and friends when you bring them to the house of God. American Christianity expects entertainment; it expects inspiring messages of self-help that make you feel closer to a distant God. What it *doesn't* expect is the Gospel that this God comes to us himself and serves us through what appear to be mundane earthly means but – Behold! the unexpected! – these humble means carry the very utterances of God Most High and indeed the very body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Because it is so unexpected, because it does not meet expectations, people often will turn and go their own way. “This is too hard a saying, who can believe it?” they say with the crowds of John 6. Nevertheless, Jesus has placed the mantle, the yolk upon *you* that you may learn from him and benefit from his call, “Follow me.”

Now we come to the difficult part of our text. Jesus sees Nathanael coming toward him and says, “Ah, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” And, immediately Nathanael interprets that to mean Jesus knows him, sees right through him, and Jesus explains that he saw Nathanael under the fig tree... and apparently *that* is enough for Nathanael to know that Jesus is the Son of God, King of Israel.

The Scriptures don't tell us what that fig tree experience was, but perhaps Jesus' greeting gives us some clue: "An Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit."

That's almost certainly a veiled reference to the 32<sup>nd</sup> psalm. Listen to it in consideration of this word deceit and of the image of Nathanael believing no one could/would know what he was wrestling with under the fig tree. The psalm says,

Blessed is the one  
whose sin the LORD does not count against them  
and **in whose spirit is no deceit.**

**When I kept silent,  
my bones wasted away**  
through my groaning all day long.  
4 For day and night  
your hand was heavy on me;  
my strength was sapped  
as in the heat of summer.

**Then I acknowledged my sin to you  
and did not cover up my iniquity.**  
I said, "I will confess  
my transgressions to the LORD."  
And you forgave  
the guilt of my sin.

If Nathanael is one in whom there is no deceit, perhaps he's one (as the Psalm hints) who was terribly grieving his sins but knew not where to turn for aid and comfort. If the Messiah-long expected still has not come, where may I go to have certainty of God's love and

salvation? (And wouldn't this deep yearning for a Messiah and forgiveness give Nathanael even more frustration in Philip's claim that the Messiah comes from Nazareth?) But, if not from Nazareth and if I still have no Messiah, no access to forgiveness, where may I go and openly confess my sins without fear of such confession being used against me? Must I not just cover it up and only groan inwardly, and – as I do – do I not feel as if my bones are wasting away? I have no strength and, as the Scriptures say, my pillow is stained with my tears. There is nowhere to turn or hide, except to groan inwardly under the fig tree (which, coincidentally or not, was probably the very type of fruit tree involved in Adam's Fall.)

So, if Nathanael is amazed that Jesus knows his inner desperation, his sighs too deep for words, then Jesus' response to Nathanael ought amaze (and comfort!) Nathanael – and you and me – far more:

“Do you believe because I said I saw you under the fig tree? Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

Now, here's another reference to the Old Testament; this time, not to the psalms, but to Genesis and the dream of Jacob, in which he saw a ladder to heaven and angels ascending and descending upon that ladder. And what was the purpose of that dream? To comfort Jacob to know that, sinner though he was (recall, he tricked his father and stole his brother's birthright), he still had

access to the loving God of the covenant, that God of *Israel* (isn't that what Jacob would be renamed? – Israel, meaning “wrestles with God,” much like a sinner wrestling in confession of his sins).

So then, here we have the fulfillment of Jacob's ladder... the fulfillment *for* Israel found *in* Jesus, the *Messiah*, the one long-promised from Genesis 3 to again restore God's relationship with his people and give sinners access to God Most High. This is *your* comfort just as much as Nathanael's. And, in fact, this image of angels ascending and descending upon Christ cements the truth that this text is not really about Nathanael as much as it's another reminder for you that Epiphany teaches you to focus on the divinity of Jesus. Consider all the phrases again: “Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote;” “Come and behold the unexpected;” “Rabbi; you are the Son of God, the King of Israel!” And what does this one, once announced by the angel Gabriel as the Son of God say of himself, “On me, the Son of Man, you will see angels ascending and descending.” In other words, “in Me, Son of God and Son of Man – finally, after all these generations of long awaiting and expectation – in Me, you have access to the Father. You have the forgiveness of sins; you have a clear standing and clear conscience before God.”

Is that not yours in the Christ of the cross? Is that not the image of access to God when the crucified stretches out his arms upon the beams, that all might be drawn to that Lamb of God,

“Come unto me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest”? Is that not the promise of comfort in his teaching when that same Lamb of God says, “Take my yolk upon you and learn from me”? And isn’t that the very definition of salvation by grace alone, when that same Jesus reminds you, “You did not choose me, but I chose you to bear fruit...” and – how does that verse end, but with an appeal to Jesus as the ladder to heaven, the access to God, when he concludes, “so that whatever you ask the Father *in my name*, he may give it to you.”

In your baptism, Jesus has tied you to himself, to his own baptism wherein he was certified the Messiah. In your baptism, he has given you access to the Father, that there need be no deceit in your mouth or heart, nor a wasting away of bones, but that you may openly confess your sins, and – by the ladder of your Messiah and intercessor who is Jesus, the Christ – you may have forgiveness and a clear conscience before God Most High.

Thus, bring your children to the font and give them this adoption. Call those who have sinned against you, indeed, call yourself and your own sins to the feet of Jesus to receive his absolution. Run to the Lord’s Table and behold the unexpected – that in the flesh and blood celebrated at Christmas you have the divine Messiah made known in Epiphany.

In the Name of the Father  
 And of the Son  
 And of the Holy Spirit.

+ AMEN +

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