

John 1:43-51
Second Sunday after Epiphany
January 14, 2024

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

Our text, Jesus, in calling Nathanael, says “Ah! An Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Sometimes, we get confused about the calling of the disciples because we forget that Jesus once called them to be followers (believers), then later called twelve of those faithful to be his students (disciples) whom He would send out as the apostles. We need to keep clear which calling is which calling. For example, when Jesus says, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men,” he’s speaking of the call to be sent out as the apostles. But, in our text this morning, which (beginning with that phrase, “the next day”) links this account back to the previous verses in which John the Baptist is on the banks of the Jordan, pointing to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, this occasion is about Jesus calling sinners to faith.

As you listened to the three readings a few moments ago, you probably felt pretty comfortable with how the first reading – the calling of Samuel – seemed to tie in to our Gospel reading, but you may have wondered how that reading from 1 Corinthians 6 fits with these at all! It seems completely unrelated (and, from a standpoint

of the three-year lectionary was designed, perhaps not a lot of thought was put into how it was related to the Gospel reading). Nevertheless, when we consider that the Gospel reading is about Jesus calling to faith, then truly the *Epistle* Reading (even if only coincidentally) is perhaps more aligned with the Gospel Reading than is the *Old Testament* Reading, in which we think of Samuel being called into the Lord's service (though, he, too, was called to faith, for he formerly "did not know the Lord.")

For, what does it mean to be called into the faith, but to be called to trust the Christ for the benefit of your whole body and life? "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?" Paul asks the Corinthians. "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price," he tells them.

And, if our whole body and life is being saved by the Messiah, if "believing in Jesus" means not merely "believing he exists" but rather "trusting that His promises are trustworthy, His saving mission is redemptive, so that my whole body and life do, in their due order, benefit," then we can understand both Philip's joy *and* Nathanael's hesitation.

Philip is called by the Incarnate Christ, "Follow Me." And, where the Word speaks, He creates faith, and the faithful rejoice... so that Philip finds Nathaniel and says, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote!" What joy! The Messiah is no longer a shadowy promise, an ancient prophecy, an

idealistic hope... the Messiah is flesh and blood, tangible, incarnate. So much so that he not only has a name, but a hometown and a family lineage: "Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Yes, news that the Messiah is incarnate, a person of history, a man who walks the earth so that the promise fulfilled can never be denied or in doubt... that is reason for joy.

But, almost as if the news is 'too incarnate, too earthy, too plain to possibly be true,' the rational mind hesitates and doubts: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" This is sometimes your doubt, too, isn't it?

"Can anything good (trustworthy, reliable) come from words in a book, translated into different languages? Can anything good come from water? Can anything good come from bread and wine? Can anything good come from religious proclamation? Can anything good come from an altar and pulpit and font, all made of wood and designed and carved by men?" (And now, in this generation, the doubt even reaches new heights): "Can anything good (trustworthy, reliable) come from history?"

When the tangible nature of daily life is so reliably unreliable and depressing, we wonder if any promises for the supernatural to work through the incarnate, in space and time, is worth hoping in.

But, the "Come and See" of Philip's urging to Nathaniel does not try to escape the flesh-and-blood lowliness of it all, but captures the same truth that we heard from St Paul's letter to the Ephesians at the Festival of Epiphany: the mystery of Jesus Christ, the gospel to

be shared with the Gentiles and all those who seek signs and wisdom and things above... the mystery of Jesus Christ is flesh-and-blood; the Messiah is incarnate, His promises – mysterious they may be – are attached to earthy, incarnational signs, that we may receive and hold in all of our senses the substance and content of the Messiah’s mysterious work now completed and poured out.

This is one of the great perils of American Christianity today. It’s gnostic, anti-sacramental spiritualism teaches people to despise the incarnate and to “Come and See Jesus” in music and heartfelt emotions and with hands rising up and stretching out to the higher things above because, they implicitly admit, they doubt that Christ is still to be found according to His incarnational promises. Veiled in water?... bread and wine? “What good can come from them?” they ask. And so, “what good can come from such spiritualism?”, I ask.

Instead, the mystery of Jesus Christ is that he would incarnationally make himself available to us in flesh and blood *precisely because* he knows we are sinners in flesh and blood... our wrestlings may be against spiritual darkness, but that all plays out in and affects daily life in flesh and blood. And so, if sinners are to be saved, to be called into that salvation, such must happen in flesh and blood.

Isn’t that what we hear in our Gospel Reading? Isn’t that what we hear in our epistle reading? Is the teaching to repent of sins and wrestle against temptation merely a spiritual teaching for a

spiritual wrestling? How does Luther teach in the Small Catechism: “What sins should we confess? Have you been lazy... hot-tempered, rude, quarrelsome” (all bodily!). Or, what does Paul say in our epistle: “The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.” Indeed, sexual immorality (just as lazy sloth, hot-temperedness, rudeness, a quarrelsome nature) does not only play out in the mind and heart, but in the body; so that the body, too, needs to be purchased, paid for, redeemed... so that ‘the body is meant for the Lord’ (from Creation) *and the Lord for the body* (redemption). *And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power* (sanctification made perfect in the resurrection).

So then, it is not merely your soul that is a member of Christ, but Paul says, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” So then, how do we wrestle against powers of spiritual darkness? “Flee from sexual immorality... for the sexual immoral person sins against his own body.” Sounds like a pretty incarnational struggle, doesn’t it? You yourself may know experientially – it’s a *very* incarnational struggle.

And so, we need an incarnate Savior, who knows that – even in our moments of isolation, loneliness, solitude, whatever it is we wrestle with affects not just the soul, but daily life – body, mind, spirit, heart.

Go back to our Gospel reading, and Jesus proves himself to be that incarnate Savior for incarnate sinners. Consider his

introduction to Nathanael: “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” Deceit – *δολος*, from *δολοω*: to distort or falsify. Where does that happen? Not in the mind or in the heart; the mind and heart know the truth – even if they plan the deceit. Deceit is *carried out* in flesh and blood.

“How do you know me?” Nathanael responds. He might have well have asked, “How do you see through me?” Isn’t that the truth of how we flesh-and-blood sinners want to receive our flesh-and-blood savior? On the surface, only on the surface, keep everything at arm’s length. We’ll tell him we believe in him, but “don’t look too deep, Lord, for below the surface you’ll see the truth.” Perhaps this is why so many want the Lord’s deliverance to be ‘spiritualistic’: because they know their true problems go much deeper than skin-deep. The heart is corrupt, the mind is corrupt, so that the daily life is deceitful about what rages within. And we try to hide it, try desperately to hide it. In fact, Jesus’ description of Nathanael – “an Israelite in whom there is no deceit” – probably brought to Nathanael’s recollection the words of the psalm,

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

Sounds pretty upright and pious, but then the psalmist continues:

**3 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.

**5 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.

That's a daily life wrestling, isn't it? It may be in heart and mind, but it affects body and life: "When I kept silent, my *bones* wasted away through my groaning all day long... My *strength* was sapped as in the heat of summer." But then, "I acknowledged my sin... and did not cover up my iniquity." When we confess our sins, the weight of guilt lifts ... but more importantly, the apostle says, "when we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

In other words, Jesus' introduction to Nathanael would appear to perhaps be a call to repentance, wouldn't it?... and an acknowledgement from Nathanael that – whatever was going on in heart, mind, body, life under that fig tree – Nathanael knew himself, thought himself, believed himself to be bodily isolated and so believed himself to be spiritually isolated. But we're never alone and

hidden away from the all-seeing God, even when He chooses to work through humble, incarnate means.

But, because He works through humble, incarnate means... because he *saves* through humble, incarnate means... the salvation is not experienced as a sudden spiritual euphoria, but rather, “Come and see.” Come and behold, veiled in incarnate means, the content and truth and substance of your salvation.

Upon the cross you see flesh torn open, blood pouring forth. But, as Jesus says to Nathanael, you are truly seeing “heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” There – in flesh and blood – is your salvation. Jesus of Nazareth, (supposed) son of Joseph, dying on the cross. Can anything good come from it? Indeed, it can. Heaven opened. How does the *Te Deum* confess it:

When You took upon Yourself to deliver man, You humbled Yourself to be born of a virgin. When You had overcome the sharpness of death, You **opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.**

Incarnate Savior opening heaven. Flesh and blood Redeemer accomplishing spiritual things. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” The Messiah of whom Moses and the prophets wrote.

And, if true so incarnationally for His Messianic mission for our Justification, then also true for His pouring out that salvation through earthly means. Can anything good come from water?

Heaven is opened to you. Can anything good come from earthly proclamation? The Divine Word is declared to you. Can anything good come from bread and wine? The body and blood of Christ, given to you. Can anything good come from manmade pulpit, altar, and font? The gifts of God freely and abundantly and reliably provided for you.

Therefore, if the spiritual things of salvation, forgiveness, eternal life are going to be attached to flesh-and-blood things, then daily life things are part of the spiritual struggle, aren't they? "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have (by baptism) from God. You are not your own, for you were bought with a price." So, faithful ones, glorify God in *your* body... a daily confession that He has redeemed you in *His* body.

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

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
Calvary Lutheran Church
January 14, 2024