

Scripture Lesson: Genesis 28:10-17

Pew Bible O.T. pg. 24

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹² And he dreamed that there was a stairway set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven itself, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring, ¹⁴ and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵ Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." ¹⁶ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" ¹⁷ And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

Scripture Lesson: John 1:43-51

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 87

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰ Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹ And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Genesis 28:10-17 and John 1:43-51

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"Anything Good?"

Rev. Amy Terhune

There's an old story, which probably isn't true, about a high school senior filling out an applications for college. As she's going along, she encounters the question: Please describe your leadership skills and experience. She stares at the question long and hard. She's 18. She's been involved in many things, but she's never been elected to leadership in anything. She's never been to leadership seminar. No teacher or friend has ever picked her out to be in charge of anything. And frankly, she's never really wanted to lead anything. So, both honest and conscientious, she writes a truthful answer: "I don't have much skill or experience in leadership. But I'm a very faithful follower."

So imagine her surprise when she gets an acceptance letter back from the college a month or two later, which reads: "Dear Applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 leaders in the incoming freshman class. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one faithful follower." [adapted from an old story passed around in many iterations...]

Friends, we need good leaders in our world – leaders more interested in service than spotlight; leaders more concerned with protecting the public than protecting their own interests; leaders less consumed with power and prestige than with empowering and pressing forward; leaders who see the

good in others, who can work with different kinds of people, who can be patient and endure when things are hard.

But we also need faithful followers. Those who will get into the trenches and do the work – the daily grind, the glory-less jobs and thankless tasks that keep a church, a community, and country running. That’s who Philip is. We meet him in this morning’s gospel, and we know he’s one of Jesus’ disciples, but he doesn’t get much billing. He’s mentioned in passing a few times. He figures a little more prominently in John 12, when some Greeks want to meet Jesus, and in Acts 8, when an Ethiopian Eunuch wants to be baptized. Jesus finds Philip. We don’t know where Jesus finds him, or what’s going on in Philip’s life, or what Jesus says, other than “follow me.” I’ve got to believe there’s more to that story, but we never hear it. All we know is that when Jesus called, Philip committed his life. And whenever we meet him, he’s bringing people to Jesus. Because that’s what Philip does. But this morning, it’s not Greeks or Ethiopians. It’s his old friend Nathanael.

Now normally, when we think about people being summoned to God’s service, we think about Paul, who sees a blinding light on the road to Damascus. Or Samuel, who hears God’s voice echoing throughout the temple. Or Isaiah, who sees angels and the heavenly scene and is overcome with awe. Or Moses, who encounters a burning bush. Many of these most famous Biblical characters got theatrics and pyrotechnics, voices in the night, encounters in the wild, explicit instructions. And then there’s Nathanael. What did Nathanael get? He got Philip—which isn’t nearly as exciting, but probably resonates a lot more with most of us. After all, theatrics are relatively rare. Most of us are here because we have a Philip somewhere in our life, in our past, who said, “Why don’t you come check this out?”

When it comes to helping those we love find God, the single most effective too remains the ‘Philip method’—a personal invitation, made to a friend, in a non-confrontation manner. That is how we will grow the church. But let me state this very clearly. The reason that is true is because the things in life that matter most rarely come with pyrotechnics or explicit instructions. The things that build our church also build our families, our friendships, morale at our workplace or school or community are things like simple one-on-one kindness. It’s taking the time to reach out, connect, invite into conversation, and express our care for another.

Nathanael came because he had a friend who cared. Philip made the invitation. But notice this about Philip. He wasn’t pushy or argumentative. He didn’t try to be a know-it-all or a holier-than-thou example. Nathanael was permitted to have his doubts, give voice to his doubts, and it was okay.

He’s skeptical because Jesus comes from Nazareth. And that’s a problem. Because Nazareth is mentioned anywhere in the Hebrew bible. Matthew puts Jesus and his family settling in Nazareth after they return from Egypt because Matthew mistranslates something, and argues in error that there’s a prophecy that the Messiah will be a Nazorean. There’s no such prophecy. You can scour the Hebrew Scriptures, but you won’t find it. So that’s strike one.

But even more, Nazareth has a sketchy reputation. Nathanael is rightly dubious. “Nazareth? That little garrison town where the Romans live? A place full of traitors, Roman sympathizers, and wimpy turncoats? A place with *deja-vu* strip clubs on every corner and pawn shops and pigs playing in the mud! No! No Messiah—no deliverer of Israel—could *possibly* come from Nazareth!”

And Philip doesn’t fight with him or try to talk him out of what they both know about Nazareth. “Just come and see,” says Philip. Don’t sit and listen, don’t go home and sleep on it. Come and seek. And to his credit, Nathanael does.

And what does he see? Just page through the first few chapters of John. He sees water turned to wine. He sees Jesus turn over tables in the temple, best the Pharisees and the Sadducees in arguments, to the point where some of them, like Nicodemus, come to him at night to learn. He sees Samaritans falling at Jesus’ feet, the feeding of thousands, walking on water, healings of all kinds, the resurrection of Lazarus. What does he see? He’s sees how Jesus’ teaching draws all kinds from far and near – Jews, Greeks, Samaritans, Romans, Leaders, Peasants, Wealthy, Poor. And he sees how that teaching sets his

own heart aflame: “I Am” says Jesus. “I am bread, water, light. I am shepherd, gate, resurrection. I am way, truth, life.” Nathanael’s never seen anything like this before.

But here’s what’s even more touching, at least to me: Long before Nathanael has chance to see anything, Jesus sees him! This lesson shows us, “...that even though we might be fraught with doubt, sunk in the pursuits of our daily regimes, trying to secure our lives in this world or encapsulated in our daily responsibilities that there is One who sees us and knows us even better than we know ourselves.” [from Carl E. Roemer, in illustrations for John 1:43-51, www.Sermons.com.] There is One who sees all we may yet become, one calling us to see what matters and join Him in truly living.

Nathanael comes with Philip thinking to learn more about this Jesus, and instead, Jesus tells Nathanael: "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Here’s a guy who doesn’t pretend to be what he isn’t. Here’s a guy with real doubts; with real potential. Jesus turns a spotlight on the deepest, darkest corners of Nathanael’s heart. So often, when we talk about shining a light into deep dark corner, we assume it is because Jesus is about to expose evil and sin and corruption, and sometimes that needs to happen. But perhaps the greatest corruption of our hearts is this idea that this is it—this is all we are and all we’re going to be. Jesus shines a light to show Nathanael something else entirely.

In the museum up at Quincy Mine in Hancock, there’s a display of the copper ore that was dug out from deep beneath the earth’s crust. Some of it, you can pick up and touch and get a sense for how it feels. But some of it is housed underneath a glass display case. As displays go, it’s not particularly interesting. It’s just a bunch of pieces of rock – kind of brownish lumps. But there on the glass case is a big red button, and when you push it, an ultraviolet light comes on. And when the light comes on, those rocks are transformed. They take on an iridescent glow, almost gem-like or crystal in their appearance, and it’s really stunning. Hidden in the dark lumps is a radiant beauty, but it takes the right light to bring it out. That’s what Jesus wants to do for Nathanael – help him see his own life in a different light.

And that same light can shine into your life, too. If you’re not sure where your road leads from here, if it feels like more doors are closing than there are windows opening, if you’re wondering what to do with what feels like a dead end, remember that God sees you in a different light. Remember that today does not define all days going forward. Seasons come and seasons go, and God goes with us through the cold and barren winters of the soul. Remember that Bach had gone deaf by the time he composed some of his greatest symphonies. Milton had gone blind by the time he wrote *Paradise Lost*. JK Rowling was living the nightmare of welfare and poverty when an idea came to her for a fairytale about magic.

Nathanael comes to see what Philip promises: the one about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote. But “...Jesus reveals more about himself to the skeptic than to any who have followed willingly before this, suggesting that Jesus is perfectly willing and able to prove himself... Nathanael correctly perceives Jesus’ knowledge as an act of self-revelation, and so comes to faith. His response to Jesus is more than witness. It is a confession: you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” And Jesus responds utilizing the ancient imagery that would have meant a lot to Nathanael - imagery of Jacob’s ladder from Genesis 28, only Jesus himself is the ladder – the one who bridges the distance between Heaven and earth, between God and humankind. [ideas here from “The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” by Gail R. O’Day in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) pg. 532.] And he gives Nathanael a glimpse of a higher life – a Kingdom not of this world, not made with hands – one that lives in the heart; one where our God-given gifts are used rightly and for the blessing of all people.

One of the oldest gospel spirituals still sung today is based on Genesis 28 – the story of Jacob’s ladder. We are climbing Jacob’s ladder... Every rung goes higher, higher... Sinner, do you love my Jesus?... If you love him, why not serve him... Do you think I’d make a soldier... It was sung in the fields by slaves in the south possibly as early as the 1750s, but certainly by 1825. It’s a spiritual of persistence, and of resistance, which calls the singers not only to grow deeper in the faith, but to keep climbing out of the pits of oppression. Notice, it doesn’t mention the angels ascending and descending.

Rather, it's a song about personal agency – a freedom song, where those oppressed keep going, keep working, keep climbing, for there is no hole deep enough to keep one down in the dark forever. With a steady, plodding beat, it invites us to overcome one obstacle after another. Like Nathanael, that old spiritual helped the singers “come and see” God’s presence in their subjugation and their own worth and power despite degradation. It was a call in the midst of a society that didn’t value their gifts. It was a vision for those desperate for hope and a rallying cry for those seeking justice.

On the UMC discipleship website, C. Michael Hawn offers this insight: “Theologian and Civil Rights leader Howard Thurman (1899–1981), commenting on this spiritual, believes it articulates a theology of hope: “There seems to be basic to human experience a kind of incurable optimism about the ultimate destiny of humankind... Sometimes blindly, sometimes with scarce hope of vindication, often with wild irrationality, the spirit of man dares to affirm ultimate hope” (Thurman, p. 84). Thurman further develops the theme of hope, concluding with an expansive understanding of the meaning of this spiritual that includes all humanity: “We are all climbing Jacob’s ladder, and every rung goes higher and higher. All who recognize that this is a living part of their experience join with those early destiny-bound singers who marched through all the miseries of slavery confident that they could never be entirely earth-bound” (Thurman, 1975, p. 87).” [from <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns-we-are-climbing-jacobs-ladder>.]

All of us are called to be followers of Jesus Christ. Like Philip, we can all be a friend to another, accept their doubts, their pain, their concerns, invite them to come and see and discover something deeper. Like Nathanael, we can be who we are and allow others the same courtesy. We can show another their potential, their beauty, their intrinsic worth. We can be those who help other persevere in hard times and seek what isn’t yet. The gap between heaven and earth is not so vast as we like to think. Even now, the landscape is changing. So before you ask yourself if anything good can come out of Nazareth... Out of homeless shelters... Out of teenagers and octogenarians... Out of Democrats... Out of Republicans... Out of Israel... Out of Gaza... Out of Ukraine... Out of Saginaw... Out of hopelessness or pain or disappointments... Out of me... Out of you... Come and see... Experience... Remember... You are not bound by earth or things of it. And you will see greater things than these. Amen.