

January 21, 2018 Second Sunday after Epiphany
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Peace Lutheran Church of Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

John 1:43-51

The holy gospel according to Saint John, the first chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee.

He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me."

⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.

⁴⁵Philip 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."

⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Philip said to him, "Come and see."

⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him,

"Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"

⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?"

Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."

⁴⁹Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God!

You are the King of Israel!"

⁵⁰Jesus answered,

"Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree?

You will see greater things than these."

⁵¹And 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."

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Today, I would like to begin what I am going to consider a sermon in two parts...because this week we hear the writer of John's gospel tell about Jesus beginning to gather the twelve disciples – calling them to follow...to come and see who he is. Next week, we will hear Mark's telling of this part of Jesus' life and ministry. And they will each emphasize different things...and, notably, different characters...

John is almost always and only ever trying to show us who Jesus is...and how Jesus is transforming the world. It is almost as if he doesn't see anyone else as active participants in this process. And the picture he paints of Jesus is grand and beautiful...if strange. Mark,

on the other hand, is different. He cares very much how people react to Jesus...how others are drawn into the shared work of building the kingdom of God, which is so close at hand.

So, today we will reflect on how John's telling of the calling of the disciples shows us who Jesus is and what he will do. Next week, we will think much more about who are the ones Jesus calls...and what they...and we...are being called to do and be.

Today's fairly odd and cryptic gospel concludes with an equally odd...and grandiose pronouncement from Jesus:

More roughly, but more accurately translated, he says, "Amen, Amen, I am saying to you all, you will see heaven opened and the messengers of God going up and coming down upon the Son of Humanity."

We hear this cosmic proclamation from Jesus...Knowing that if we were reading John's gospel from beginning to end, we would still have ringing in our ears the expansive poetry of God's Word singing the world into being at the beginning of the beginning...

And now, standing at the threshold of his public ministry, Jesus himself prophesies a vision to us: We will witness the open heavens... and the messengers of God ascending and descending on the Son of Humanity. This is the enigmatic image that ends the story of the first disciples being gathered to follow Jesus: Jesus as the new Jacob's ladder...

On the one hand, it's a sort of funny mental image...It summons to my mind a memory of the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes when the blond mischievous five-year-old Calvin is pretending he has grown to such a huge size that his head is up above the clouds, and his shoes are big enough to cover continents... and it looks like he's balancing... teetering on a basketball-sized planet Earth...

It sounds almost like Jesus is telling us he is like that too... with his feet on earth and his head in heaven... and the angels clambering up and down his back... his arms... onto his ankles and toes and off to spread God's word and work among all of us... way down here... tiny... insignificant... and far away from God.

I don't know what kind of climbing gear those angels use to get all the way from heaven to earth and back...but whatever it is, I know I don't have it. I'm not especially athletic...and my fairly puny attempts at climbing...both mountains...and the tall human made things I've come across... have proved that my physical athleticism is about as mediocre as my spiritual athleticism.

I am a bit like Nathaniel, when I face spiritual mountains...that challenge the strength of my faith or my willingness to pursue my callings. I find reasons to scoff, snark, or otherwise deflect.

In light of the revelation being offered of who Jesus is, Nathanael is a persistent cynic in the few words he speaks today... He doubts that anyone of consequence could come from somewhere like Nazareth... and then when Jesus approaches him...and seems to know him...he immediately interrogates him about how... like the killjoy insisting a magician explain his illusion.

But one of the things Jesus is showing us about what God is doing in the world...is that his knowledge and wisdom defy our understanding... and that the places and people we consider trustworthy and worthwhile are not the ones that God is choosing in order to enter the world. These two things are of great importance. Our questions about who God is are almost always too small... and even more than this... our expectations of where God will be at work will almost always be defied.

God has entered a world full of people who have great faith in their wisdom...and in the lines they draw between who matters and who does not...and what is worthwhile and what is not.

But here at the end of the first chapter of John we are not in a place that seems too worthwhile to most. We are in Galilee... in Bethany... by the Jordan River... near a little fishing village... listening to a stranger from a nowhere town.

But something on a cosmic scale is definitely going on. With the hymn of creation still ringing in our ears, the gathering of Jesus' disciples has begun.

These followers seem to be drawn to him by some magnetic effect... like dominoes bumping one another forward, as Andrew finds Peter, and Jesus finds Philip, and Philip finds Nathanael... and even despite Nathanael's resistance... they are all drawn to come and see what is going on in this one who is being called by...well...so many strange titles:

Lamb of God...Rabbi...Messiah...Son of God AND Son of Joseph... the One about Whom Moses AND the Prophets Wrote...

And with this heaping up of new followers and of titles...as the energy builds and builds around Jesus, he speaks into this world with a voice as powerful as one would expect from the Divine Cosmic Word.

And, he transcends their acclamations and expectations in a breath:

He says: "Amen, Amen, I am saying to you all, you will see heaven opened and the messengers of God going up and coming down upon the Son of Humanity."

He says: "You are about to exclaim 'Amen!' when you witness what I am...how I am transforming this world. The word will just tumble out of your mouths. You won't be able to help it.

Deceitful Jacob, the ancestor of your people had a vision at Bethel. He saw messengers of God ascending and descending between earth and heaven as if on a ladder. But, I have gathered Nathanael...a new Jacob who represents a new Israel to whom God will be revealed. And he will see...and so will all of you...You will see that there is no ladder between heaven and earth. There doesn't need to be. Because there is me, the Son of Humanity.

You can't climb high enough to find what you are looking for, and I know that you are tired from trying...so I am bringing it to you. You can't find words enough to describe what or who I am...because I am the Word from which all words have come.

So, I will ascend to the heights that you cannot to bring together heaven and earth; my Father and you – his children.

Earth and heaven do not touch on a ladder... at a mountain or in a tower... in a high place you cannot reach... or in a building that can be destroyed. Because heaven and earth touch in me. And I am here with you.

The height that I will ascend you cannot even imagine...not the height of mountains or towers... but the height of self-giving love... I will even climb to the high cross to die... because I am the one who can and will do anything to bring together earth and heaven and all that God loves."

The Eternal Word...who sings to Mount Everest...and dances on Mount Sinai...The Divine Logos... who couldn't be reached by the tower of Babel... and who is enthroned above the Chrysler Building... The One who we could never reach is reaching out to us with human hands and voice... in flesh and blood... in living water... by the Sea of Galilee two thousand years ago...and here in Austin, Texas. Now.

He is among us in the Words of the sacred texts we study together, in the bread and wine of communion, in the water and Spirit of baptism.

So, Jesus has given us a source of hope and trust that is closer *and* more powerful than any mountain or tower...and we don't have to mourn that our legs and lungs and spirits are too weak to climb to it... or that our minds are too small or too scattered to even inquire of it...and that we will probably never be able to guess what unworthy and ill-regarded place the Author of Creation might appear from... And we don't have to fear a day when the tower... or temple... or nation...or congregation... will be destroyed. Because, Jesus will not be.

The creative song of the universe is among us always... and he is drawing us all to himself... with Philip and Nathaniel... we are disciples tumbling like dominoes towards this one who is beyond all titles and praise...who we cannot help to but come and follow...

He is the meeting place of heaven and earth, and we don't need any climbing gear to get to him... because he is right here, drawing us to himself... to God... into eternal life.

Confident in this power and promise...next week we get to sit with this story as Mark offers it to us...and imagine how we might then might shape the work of our lives in response to Christ's call.

To be continued...

Amen.