

January 14, 2024
I Samuel 3:1-10, 19-20; John 1:43-51
"Come and See"
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

In his book "The Proper Bostonian," the story is told of John Lowell and how he ate oatmeal for breakfast every day. Then, one morning, his wife burned the oatmeal, and there was no more in the cupboard. His wife explained that, after having oatmeal every day for 50 years, there would be none that morning. To which John Lowell responded, "That's alright my dear, I never really cared for the stuff anyway." How many of us live oatmeal lives? Bland and unsatisfying, routine and mundane. My Christian brothers and sisters, we are not called to live oatmeal lives, when we are called to use our gifts as Disciples of Christ, we are called to follow Christ, we are called to see much greater things. We are called not to live oatmeal lives, but as Christ's Disciples we are called to live lives of splendor and glory. No oatmeal for the baptized. For us, it is jalapenos with Tabasco. (1) That's our call. Come and see!

Today, we have ordained and installed new leaders in this congregation. Men and women who have answered the call to step up and serve in many different areas here. Using their gifts to be a part of this church. As I enter this church on Sunday mornings and look around, I see a diverse group of people who serve this church in a variety of ways. I see a man who shows up early to unlock the doors, turn on the heat and the lights. I see a woman making coffee for fellowship hour. A man practicing with the choir. A woman practicing reading scripture for that day. After church I see a man speaking to a visitor. And then there's all that hugging! No two people I just described minister here in the same way, yet they all share in one common ministry. A ministry instituted by Christ, continuing in the mission of Christ, embraced by the spirit of Christ. But my friends, there is so much more to this ministry as disciples.

Today's scripture passage from the Gospel of John, describes the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the call of others to follow as his disciples. After Jesus is baptized by John, Jesus lets John fully prepare the way for him. Jesus waits in his hometown, doing little acts of ministry, until John's ministry comes to a close. And when Jesus first sets out, does he do it alone? No, he begins by gathering disciples, witnesses, preachers, hearers; fisherfolk and tax collectors, and appoints them to the work of the ministry with him. Andrew, Peter and Philip are the first to recognize something new and different in this rabbi from Nazareth. And Philip runs to find his friend Nathanael.

Philip tells Nathanael, "We have found the one promised by Moses and the prophets, Jesus from Nazareth!" But Nathanael, well, he is not impressed at all. Nathanael is an intellectual and is distrustful of extravagant religious claims. He's heard it all before and isn't about to be taken in by the latest claim, especially if it's a carpenter's son from the hick town of Nazareth! Surely this prophet will come from the great city of Jerusalem, he thinks, the site of political and economic power, religious authority, and God's own dwelling place in the Temple, for heaven's sake! That is why Nathanael responds with a sneer, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And yet Philip doesn't walk away hurt or gets defensive, or vows to never share anything with Nathanael again, no, he simply takes it in stride and answers, "Come and See."

In many ways, this is a very unlikely meeting. Nathanael didn't even want to meet

the guy. He was just doing it as a favor to his friend Philip. The one of whom the prophets spoke? Some self-appointed teacher from the back woods little town of Nazareth? Really? But notice Jesus calls him the "Israelite without deceit." Now by this, he is referring to the Old Testament stories about Jacob, the namesake of Israel. You know Jacob, the one known for using deception and guile in order to grasp after the things he desires. Nathanael's frankness – who can believe anyone who comes from that little town? - stands in contrast to Jacob's deception, you are not like him. But back up, Jesus wasn't there for the Nathanael's comment, right? How did Jesus know what Nathanael had said? So Nathanael presses further. How do you know me? And Jesus says he saw Nathanael sitting under the fig tree. When was that?

As one pastor writes, "Among the tiny, crowded homes of ancient Palestine, you see, the shade of a fig tree in the courtyard was the accustomed place of study for students, scholars, and teachers. It was the only place you could get away from the quarreling in-laws and hollering children for some peace and quiet with your thoughts and books. Nathanael's apostolic career might have begun with a sneer, but it ended with big, bold, brave, beautiful belief." (2) "Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel!" This declaration is compared to Jacob's amazement following a dream about angels ascending and descending upon a ladder to heaven. And Jesus promises to show even **greater** things. Because the next event in the Gospel of John, is Jesus' first miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana.

Now you never hear about Nathanael again in the gospels, except briefly after Jesus' resurrection, he is seen fishing. And he doesn't appear on any of the lists of disciples anywhere else. However, some scholars think that Nathanael is John's name for the disciple called Bartholomew, and if that is true, Bartholomew preached the Gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth, to the end of his life. All from that simple phrase from Philip, "come and see".

Come and see, maybe that should be our new campaign to grow this congregation, a simple invitation – come and see. Words I think that sum up not only the heart of the Gospel of John but the whole of Christian life. It's all about an invitation. It's not about cramming your faith down someone else's throat. After all, nowhere in the Bible does it tell us to say, "Have you given your life to Christ?" Come and see. And if they aren't interested or dismiss what we're saying or make some smart aleck response, that's okay. We know that the good news of God's love for us and all the world, can be hard to believe. It's not our job to convert, just to invite. (3) And follow as disciples.

Let me ask you this - so, how are those New Year's Resolutions coming along? Am I the only one who hates all of the commercials in January, every other one is a weight loss program, a new piece of work-out equipment, complete with AI trainer. I can't wait for the Super Bowl when the commercials are about Doritos and Beer! And while losing weight and adding more exercise to our lives is really important, we don't need a self-help group or a self-improvement project, a new diet, a new regimen, a new commitment to good habits, or a step-by-step guide, to being a better Christian, a better disciple. Using our God-given gifts to serve. As the church is grounded in Jesus Christ, the church must carry on the work that Jesus modeled, empowered by the same Spirit. It is our call to use our gifts as disciples of Christ. I'll bet our new officers would agree that it is as simple as Our Old Testament Prophet, the little boy Samuel, who simply says, Here I am Lord.

Now Samuel spoke during a time when it had been a very long time since anyone had heard from the Lord. The Priest Eli, whom he served and was learning from, had grown old, blind to the future God intended, no longer able to hear the Lord, as well as being arrogant and a really bad example to the people. And so the Lord chooses the new, the young boy Samuel to speak his word to the people. But before Samuel could speak God's words to those in power, he had to realize who was speaking to him. Like Abraham before him, Jacob, Moses, Isaiah, even later with Mary Jesus' mother and Saul who becomes Paul, all respond to the calling with the simple words – Here I am. And in the end, all of Israel would know Samuel as God's voice, speaking to the people.

And this speaks to us here as well. Now I may not be the old dull priest – well, maybe a little . . . but the new is coming and we need to be open to it. So, I spent a good part of the week after Christmas reading about the now and future church. My friends, not only is a new pastor coming, but a new generation of members, leaders, is coming. A whole generation who doesn't know about this place, the church. A whole generation who is searching, searching for meaning and purpose, faith in something greater than themselves, a place where they can serve others. A place open to their many questions, concerns, cares. Will we be there to welcome them? Will our doors and our table remain open to them? Will we continue to invite them, until they come?

As one writes, We must believe that the best days of God's people are not behind us. The best is still to come with more prophets. We must be known for our hope. Hope in a future that's bigger than our past. And yet, there is something to our traditions, the institution of faith, that is still essential. We need to stand firm in our beliefs, knowing where we came from, who we are, what we believe. Such institutional fixtures, like you and I, know how to distinguish between a word from God and any old human word. The church, like the synagogue, is one of the only places in our culture where the young and the old make our lives together. Where else in our culture do people from four different generations entangle themselves in mutually dependent relationship without sharing the same last names? God is the God of all generations, ancient and new, and God needs us all, together, to make this world God dreams about." (4) Soon, very soon if we keep our doors open, our table open, and remain strong, soon we will have a new Samuel, new voices, new leaders.

As one pastor writes, "I love it that this passage [about Nathanael] comes up in the lectionary on this particular weekend. It reminds me of another unlikely beginning. The time is 1955 and the place: Montgomery, Alabama. The issue is forced desegregation on city buses. Local pastors are gathered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church – strategizing. Rosa Parks has recently been arrested for refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white person. Her trial will be coming soon. A lot of ideas go back and forth, but nothing clear emerges. Until – the most unlikely thing. The young pastor of the church, new to town, unknown to the city fathers – a guy in his 20s raises his hand. The boycott has a leader. Young Rev. King, it is.

"A newcomer to this circle, but like Nathanael, he has the experience in Jesus of the reign of God come near – inviting others to walk on that street where the reign of God has gotten a foothold. With Martin Luther King Jr.'s word, through his actions, according to his dream, we could see it too. Because he had raised his hand, had stepped up to walk in that place where heaven and earth come near. Because he stepped up to walk with Jesus, it turned out that – one day – was unexpectedly closer than we thought.

“The call of Nathanael reminds us, when we walk with Jesus, we walk in those unlikely places where heaven and earth come near. In this fragmented world, we represent God’s reign gaining a foothold here already, and our actions need to show it.” An act of simple hospitality in the midst of a want, a hand raised to volunteer for leadership in a community, visiting someone in a nursing care facility, singing in a worship service, mittens and hats placed on a tree – that is “where the reign of God comes near, where we catch a glimpse of a time and place where nothing’s broken and no one’s missing, and a table is spread for all God’s children.” (5)

In other words, being a disciple of Christ is showing people through the way you live your life, your beliefs, your values, what you hold true in your heart. To follow Christ in the love of God, is to walk behind, with Christ leading us, to strive to stay on the path with Christ, to be open to the turns and curves in the road, knowing we are never alone, knowing we should try to bring others along with us. Come and see what we are doing here. Follow me, Jesus said, and you will see where heaven and earth meet. Will we respond with, here I am Lord, I heard you calling, I will go where you lead me and hold your people in my heart?

Once again, Jesus proclaims this is the year of the Lord. We must rejoice and be glad in it. And remember, we don’t need a self-improvement project, a step-by-step guide to being a better Christian. Jesus’ message was not for those who want to make their life better but for those to be set free to live the life God wants for them, the life God sees possible for them. Let us live that - with the love of Christ in our hearts and the spirit of Christ in our souls! No oatmeal for the baptized. For us, it’s jalapenos with Tabasco. For me, it’s Doritos and Beer! And we shall all see even greater things to come! Amen.

(1) Piazza, the Rev. Dr. Michael S. Piazza, Blog 2016.

(2) Evertsberg, The Rev. Dr. William. “The Patron Saint of the Presbyterian Preacher.”

(3) Lose, The Rev. David. “Come and See.” www.workingpreacher.org.

(4) Byassee, The Rev. Jason. Second Sunday after Epiphany.

(5) Watkins, The Rev. Dr. Sharon. “Where Earth and Heaven Meet”. www.day1.org.