

NEW TESTAMENT READING: John 1:43-51

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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."

OLD TESTAMENT READING: Isaiah 61:1-4

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The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good tidings to the afflicted;^[a]
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison^[b] to those who are bound;
²to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³to grant to those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.
⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

“Gathering”

During this season after the Epiphany, we see the plan of God unfolding, and it involves us! (*repeat*) The light of the Christ child shone into the darkness and it then began to, and continues to, penetrate every corner of the world. The Light of Christ child was/is made known to people, all people, and they are gathered to Jesus. And then, they who have been gathered are sent to gather others, by letting his light shine through them. It’s Evangelism, eongelion (εὐαγγέλιον), in Greek. The gathered in Christ gather others to Christ! It’s God’s plan to grow the church and bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth. It’s God’s plan unfolding and it involves us! David Lose defines it well, Evangelism is *“the invitation through word and deed to ‘come and see’, always moving to the deeper invitation to ‘come and be’. And an evangelist is the beloved child of God inviting others to a transformative experience of relationship with Christ.”*¹

In the first chapter of John we see it beginning with John the Baptist, the prophet sent to cry from the wilderness, *“Make straight in the desert a highway for our God”*. Then we read that John’s testimony readies two of his disciples, Andrew and Peter, to respond to Jesus’ call. Then Philip, one of Andrew’s and Peter’s friends from Bethsaida, is also drawn to Jesus, and he tells HIS friend, Nathanael about *“the One of whom Moses and the prophets wrote”*. Indeed, there is already a circle of gatherers, and the circle is widening.

Now admittedly, Nathanael, a devout but skeptical Jew, does not accept Philip’s testimony immediately. He isn’t enthused by his friend’s excitement, and, in fact, responds with a snarky bit of sarcasm... *“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”* In light of the news this week, I can’t help but see the timeliness of this passage. *“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”* Carolyn Gillette has written lyrics to one of our hymn tunes. The first verse goes like this: *“What good can come from Nazareth? Can any good at all? Nathanael said to Philip when he heard Philip’s call. The prophets never praised it, that little backwoods place. He thought God wouldn’t choose it to be a means of grace.”*² (*repeat*).

¹D. Lose. *“Gracious Invitation”*. In: In the Meantime. <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/01/epiphany-2-b-gracious-invitation/> (accessed 1/12/18).

² Carolyn Gillette, *“What Good can Come from Nazareth?”* Newhymns:www.carolynshymns.com (accessed 1/13/18).

But Philip is not daunted. He doesn't scold, belittle or coerce. He simply trusts and invites Nathanael to "*Come and See*". Just as Jesus had said to Peter and Andrew, Philip says, "*Come and See*". And Nathanael does. But before he gets very far, he meets Jesus. He meets Jesus on the road and everything changes. He is flooded by the Light. Jesus, his Savior, is revealed to him. '*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!*,' he says. *(long pause)*

You know, the great majority of us, you and I, are products directly or indirectly of another disciple's gathering...we are here in this place on this day as a result of the Light shining through somebody else, some witness. Can you remember who it was? Can you remember who invited you to "Come & See"? For me, I think it was certainly my parents. Their witness was indirect because they witnessed most with their lives. Their relationship, their friendship with Jesus, infected me. It was contagious. They told me the story. They pointed me the right way, and testified to what Jesus meant to them. But their actions, their attitudes, and their lifestyle also witnessed powerfully to me. *I remember going to church one Sunday in Nebraska when there'd been a blizzard the night before, and no one else but the Pastor was there. I remember that. He made some comment that he'd come because he knew the Browns would likely need be let in. It made an impression on me that my parents were a bit nuts...but it also made the impression that worship and study were all important. In taking me to church every Sunday, in openly practicing prayer and study, and visibly emphasizing service and generosity to those in need, they readied me to hear Christ's call. Like Andrew's and Peter's, my ears were quickened to listen. And that's the way it is sometimes, isn't it? In fact, more often than not, "people follow Jesus without being told directly to do so, or without knowing all they might like to know about Jesus beforehand. They just start walking with him as he passes by."*³

Sometimes witnesses act more directly....by straightforwardly meeting the Other where they are, by inviting, like Philip does with Nathanael. The people being directly invited may be the Curious....seekers, checking out the faith...or they may be the Casual...just observing, not knowing exactly what they are looking for, watching from a distance. They may also be the

³ Will Willamon. "*Gathered*" <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8652/january-14-2018-gathered>. (accessed 1/12/18).

Skeptical or the Resistant, or maybe they're ones who are searching for all the wrong things (prosperity, material gain, warm and fuzzies). Regardless, the direct invitation kind of witness isn't coercive or cajoling or guilt laden. It does not sugarcoat and is not argumentative (insisting that, for instance, "Nazareth is just a wonderful place"). It is not defensive nor is it judgmental. It takes the other seriously, even the skeptic, the cynic, the angry, the wounded, the insecure, and shows respect, genuine care and interest, a true desire to engage and assist. *And that's the way it is sometimes, isn't it? People may not expect to, maybe even intend not to, but they become intrigued by the Lord. Then they become convinced, and then they hear his call.*

And finally, at times, witnesses, in addition to indirectly and directly gathering others, know to affirm the power that is already at work in the Other, and get out of the way. This is because sometimes people experience a strange, inexplicable attraction on their own. They've had some spiritual experience, some vision that they don't tell anybody about, some encounter which they can't identify but suspect it may've been God. *I've been told by some, who've been driving by our sacred space here at 704 MLKing, Jr Dr., that they've felt compelled to come in. For some unknown reason they've pulled into the parking lot and walked into a worship service!* In such situations, the witness becomes not so much a "Come & See" witness, but a "May I help you find a seat?" one. They practice a sort of "keeping one's hand off the running faucet"⁴ kind of evangelism. We see it with Philip and the Ethiopian official, don't we? The Spirit tells Philip to run to meet the Ethiopian who has already been inspired to come a long way and is needing help with the interpretation of the Scripture. Once Philip explains it, the Ethiopian asks to be baptized, and Philip does not hesitate. *And that's the way it is sometimes, isn't it? Through the mystery which is Christ, people are swept up, captured in his embrace, overwhelmed by his strength and power as he breaks into their lives, and they take a leap toward faith.*

So, friends, what do we take away from today's lesson during this season after the Epiphany? What is here for us? Well...might it be that a quick check of ourselves, men and women who have been gathered by some means to ultimately be here...might it be that a check

⁴Thomas Allen, Personal communication. Grace Presbyterian Church, Temple, TX.

is needed as to how we are doing in letting Christ's light shine through us to gather others?

How are we doing in playing our part in God's plan for euongelion, inviting others, all kinds of others, from all kinds of places, to become the persons God has CALLED them to be and the ones the world NEEDS them to be?

Are we INDIRECTLY inviting others by making our friendship with Christ so obvious that it becomes contagious? Do we excitedly and enthusiastically share our experiences with the Lord, openly practice prayer and study, and visibly show compassion and a concern for justice? Do we demonstrate a sacrificial generosity? (*pause*) 2. Are we DIRECTLY inviting others, saying, "Hey, Come and See...9:45 and 11am Sundays, 4:30pm and 6:30pm Wednesdays, 9:30am the first Mondays, 8am on the 2nd Saturdays"? Are we making sure the ones we invite know that they may come exactly as they are, bringing their skepticism, biases, questions, hurts, angers and fears with them? Are we making sure they know they are welcome without any expectations of us...no need to RSVP or bring a hostess gift, and that they can stay as long as they want or leave without notice?⁵ Do we know that they may decline our invitation, that it may take a long time and several encounters with the Lord before they enlist, or that we enter, when we invite them, into a place of vulnerability, subject to their impatience, their insults, or misjudgments? Do we know these things and graciously invite them anyway? (*pause*) 3. And finally, are we affirming? Do we expect the unexpected, the mysterious and powerful action of God of whom we witness? Do we stand in wonder and awe at God's activity in others' lives, holding the door open and offering a seat? Are we ready to point the way when the mighty and Holy Spirit of God blows someone to us? Are our lips eager to say, "*Friend, you will see greater things than these...You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man?*"

How are we doing, the Gathered, in letting the light of the Christ child shine through us to gather others? How are we playing our part in the unfolding plan of God? Amen.

⁵ Jill Duffield. "2nd Sunday after Epiphany" Looking into the Lectionary. <http://pres-outlook.org/2018/01/2nd-sunday-epiphany-january-14-2018/> (accessed 1/13/18).