

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Second Sunday after Epiphany - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

I Samuel 3:1-10 [11-20]

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

I Corinthians 6:12-20

John 1:43-51

01/14/2024

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

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 Our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

God? From Where?!

Good morning! Today we're going to skip the funny and often embarrassing stories of my own life and jump right into the text. That's because I want us to really think about some questions that I'll be asking throughout. At the end of the sermon I would like us to spend a few minutes in silence just thinking, we won't need an answer, but I think some time to ponder the questions will be good. After a yet-to-be-determined length of time I'll say a short prayer and we can continue with the Hymn of the Day.

In case you missed the annual meeting, or in case you just need a refresher, here's a recap. The modern way in which we understand congregations is something that's relatively new in the history of Christianity. The Church is always changing, and there is a distinction between congregation and Church. St. Paul's is a congregation. St. Paul's the congregation belongs to the Church. (That's why it's called a Congregational Council and not a Church Council.) But in the last two decades we have seen a steady decrease in attendance and a stark change in how congregations and the Church work. We knew things were changing, and we were trying to learn about what those changes might look like, but then the pandemic happened...

The pandemic, regardless of how you feel about it, fast tracked the cycle by about 10 years. Where we thought we might have time to try some stuff out, the reality is that people who were maybe on their way out the door already never came back. The challenge is VERY complicated, and it's

much more complex than “just getting more families in the door.” But one or two things are clear...

The first is the reality that God is calling on the church to change. Remember that Lutheran call that we are always reforming! The Holy Spirit is at work, and we need to stop and listen to what it’s saying. This is the larger and most complex question.

The second problem is more concrete, more urgent, but no less connected. Having a full-time pastor is an expensive endeavor. In just the two conferences of Lutheran congregations around here, at least 3 have changed the call for their pastors. Our Saviour in Norge is now a 1/2 time call, sharing Pastor Alex with St. Stephens in Williamsburg. In Newport News Pastor John Ericson is now 1/4 time. Across the water in Chesapeake Pastor Leslie Scanlon is now 3/4 time. Across the state the Synod is meeting with congregations that are having the hard discussions of altering the call for their pastors.

St. Paul’s will also be having this conversation. Now, the thing to realize is that while changing hours may address the short term problem, the larger issue of how to do ministry will still loom ahead. What does this have to do with our Gospel reading today? Well, as always, I’m glad you asked!

In today’s lesson we see the beginning of Jesus’ ministry as he calls Nathanael to come and follow him. It goes like this: *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?”* You see, for Nathanael, the Messiah was someone else, someone from the big city. Dr. Audrey West writes: *“The question of Jesus’ origins permeates*

John's Gospel, beginning with a soaring prologue that corresponds to the grand expectations many people had for God's anointed one. Surely, they thought, he would appear in or near the great city of Jerusalem, site of political and economic power, religious authority, and God's own dwelling place in the Temple. If not there, then at least a place to display holy grandeur or kingly authority—in today's terms, perhaps leading a parade in New York City or a March on Washington, streaming on multiple digital platforms or preaching from the center of a massive stadium, surrounded by gilded props and supported by an entourage of beautiful people.”¹

So, when Jesus shows up in Galilee, which was basically the middle of nowhere, hailing from a small town also in the middle of nowhere, Nathanael is skeptical. This is where we find ourselves now. Right alongside Nathanael, skeptical about what God is doing, wondering if we're hearing things right. And I GET IT! We've only known the Church to function in one specific way. It's hard for us to even imagine things looking different, especially when we aren't even sure what that “different” might look like.

Now, it would be easy for us to scold Nathanael, except for one detail. He is able to suspend his expectations temporarily and wait and see what God might be doing. He's skeptical, sure, but he's also willing to see how things play out. In the coming years we too will be called to think about some crazy new possibilities, and it will be important that we adopt a similar attitude to Nathanael.

And here's the cool thing. I KNOW St. Paul's can do it! I've always loved how flexible and easy going this congregation has proven to be. Time

¹<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-john-143-51-6>

and time again we are able to shrug off what would bog down other congregations and keep on doing the work of God.

During our Monday Zoom Bible study someone, either Martha or Stephanie, said a fantastic phrase. “Where is God in all this?” It’s a phrase I’m very familiar with, since I’ve had its anagram on my office door since I got here. Our seminary professor Dr. Everett handed these out, reminding us that this was the most important question and answer we could ask. Because God really is in the midst of all of this, the challenge is pointing to the places where that is.

So, as we mull all this over, let me ask a few other things. What crazy place might God be coming from where we least expect it? What crazy thing might God be doing? What’s the big dream that St. Paul’s might be called to do? And finally... What are we going to do about it?!

Amen.