

SERMON TEXT FOR EPIPHANY 2B

PREACHED JANUARY 14, 2018 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXTS: John 1.43-51; 1 Samuel 3.1-20; Psalm 139

In a week where conversation about immigration, DACA, and the President's language regarding certain countries dominated the news, we hear one Nathanael say: *"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"* Now that's a pretty biased remark, don't you think?

To put this in context, Nathanael was reacting to a comment from Philip who was telling him about Jesus, noting *"we have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote..."* Philip was excited for Nathanael to meet Jesus, but Nathaniel did not share that enthusiasm.

Seeing and hearing actually play a part in our scripture readings today. In the Old Testament lesson we find young Samuel whom, we discover, *"did not yet know the Lord."* At a time when visions were rare and unexpected, here was a young boy being summoned by God. However, since Samuel didn't yet know the Lord, he needed someone else to lead him to God, to help him to hear, to recognize God speaking to him. Eli, with failing eyesight himself, helped young Samuel to "see" and hear God in his midst, and ultimately to serve God.

It seems to me that we all need someone like Eli to help us recognize the presence of God in our lives. And that's pretty much the story of our gospel lesson today. It is there that we find Philip, who had just been recruited by Jesus to *"follow me"*, inviting Nathanael to "come and see" Jesus. Nathanael likely would not have found Jesus on his own – especially considering his bias against anything good coming out of Nazareth.

What is interesting is how Philip reacted to Nathanael's dismissive remark about Jesus' hometown. He didn't make some snide remark in return, or get defensive, as I think I might. He didn't walk away hurt or angry, vowing never to share anything with Nathanael again. He didn't do any of those things. Instead, he just took it in stride and said, *"Come and see."*

As I said, Nathanael certainly did not share Philip's enthusiasm for meeting the son of Joseph from Nazareth. But he was in for quite a surprise when he actually did meet Jesus. Even though Jesus and Nathanael had never met, when Jesus saw Nathaniel and Philip coming toward him, Jesus spoke directly to Nathanael: *"Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"* A little flattery never hurt anyone, right? Well, Nathanael was flabbergasted at Jesus' remark and wondered out loud, *"Where did you get to know me?"*

What Nathanael didn't realize is that Jesus, the Son of God, knows everything about everybody. Today's psalm lays this out perfectly: *"Lord, you have searched me out; O Lord, you have known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You trace my journeys and my resting places and are acquainted with all my ways. Indeed, there is not a word on my lips, but you, O Lord, know it altogether. ... For you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb."*

I don't know about you, but I find these words both comforting and scary! God our creator knows us better than we know ourselves, and we are never, ever out of God's thoughts. We can never escape God, no matter how hard we try. God is with us always – that's the comforting part!

Now, the truth is that we may not always recognize God in our midst. Samuel, the boy prophet didn't. He needed someone to help him know God. He needed Eli to help him to see and hear and know his creator, just as Nathanael needed Philip to lead him to Jesus.

So, how can we be better at recognizing God, hearing God's voice calling to us? And the follow-up to that is how can we help others to know God? Well, think about how you got to know God. More than likely, someone shared with you the story of Jesus, and you believed it because they believed it. That's what's been happening for over 2000 years. One person said to another, "I follow Jesus and invite you to do so too." It's always been person-to-person: thousands of people who fanned out across the globe to tell the story about Jesus and what Jesus had done for them.

For Philip, the words of invitation he chose were, "*Come and see.*" These are the words we're invited to say to others who are seeking something more from life. These are the words that people who have a desperate need for God need to hear.

Just a word of caution here. We're talking about an invitation. It's not about cramming our faith down someone else's throat. After all, nowhere in the Bible does it tell us to say, "Are you born again in Christ?" Or, "Do you know where you will spend eternity?" Or, "God loves you and wants a relationship with you...but if you turn away, God will send you to hell." No. We're just to make the invitation and let God do the rest.

And I also believe that the best way to help others to know God is to invite them to do so ("*Come and see,*" as Philip did with Nathaniel), and to share our own experiences of encounters with God. In other churches they call this "testimony", but that would probably scare away most Lutherans. So just tell your story. Tell people how God and God's presence, God's blessings have made a difference in your life. How did you make it through that dangerous or difficult circumstance? It was because you relied on God, you knew that there were people praying for you, you were comforted by the knowledge that no matter what happened you would be in God's hands.

"*Come and see.*" Over time, with practice, these are words anyone can say. Philip said them. You can say them. I can say them, too. Maybe we're not able to do it right now, but over time, with practice, these are words all of us can say - and eventually might even enjoy saying. Because sharing something that matters to you with someone who matters is, as Philip found out, pretty cool.

Epiphany is the season that is designed to reveal to us the deeper meaning of the person of Jesus Christ, to love him more sincerely, and to learn to walk with him more faithfully. Today we are called to invite others to "*come and see.*" That's all. Just do the inviting, and leave the rest to God. If we can trust history, it's pretty likely that God will show those skeptics like Nathanael that, indeed, something good did come out of Nazareth. Thanks be to God.