

Sermon Epiphany 2B
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All Saints, Mt. Pleasant
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John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 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." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." 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."

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It's a curious thing, this discipleship. It's following, seeking, searching, While at the same time, being sought after and being found, trusting that we are under the care of the shepherd who seeks out his willful and wandering sheep. Who's finding who in this situation? Who's seeking who?

There's a funny game of "hide-and-seek" going on in our Gospel from John today. In fact, it begins before today's assigned reading, when a few verses earlier, Andrew turns to follow Jesus. Jesus asks, "What are you looking for?" Without really giving him an answer, the gospel says Andrew "found" his brother Simon, so he could also follow. And then, the verses assigned for today says that Jesus then "found" Philip. Then Philip "found" Nathanael, and what he wants to tell him is this: "We have found him! The one about whom the scriptures wrote." And then when they go to see Jesus, he reveals that *in fact* he found Nathanel first; he saw him under the fig tree. Who's finding who here? Are the seekers finding the Messiah, or is Jesus the one finding them? A puzzling game indeed.

There are many questions asked in these passages, but few answers given. And the answers that are given are less definitive statements and more invitations. When Jesus asks Andrew what he is looking for, without really getting an answer, Jesus follows up with, "Come and see." And when Nathanael, in his all-too-honest way retorts to Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip simply replies, "Come and see."

You have questions. Instead of answers, You're issued an invitation. You might be seeking something but while you're searching, before you know it you discover that you're the one who has been found. Isn't that the way? Isn't that the way of this funny thing we call discipleship? This curious back-and-forth between the seeker and the sought after, the hidden one and his manifestation which appears among us at the moment we least expect it?

There's a passage in Song of Songs that came to mind this week as I was ruminating on this curious game of hide-and-seek we play. Song of Songs is, as you know, this *almost* unbiblically sensual book about the mysteries of love and physical attraction. This "song" has also been read throughout the centuries as not strictly about human love, but also as a beautiful love song of Christ to his Bride the Church.

Just listen to these words from the third chapter: "at night, I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer. "I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves." I sought him, but found him not. 3 The sentinels found me, as they went about in the city. "Have you seen him whom my soul loves?" Scarcely had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go"

It's this tantalizing escapade where the seeker searches for their beloved, roaming through the streets until reunited with the one for whom her soul longs. And once reunited, she will not let him go. That'll warm you up a bit on a cold morning, won't it!? But it's that interplay, that dance between the two, suggesting that not only is the absent lover the one who is lost, but that the seeker too is lost without her beloved.

So we begin to see the parallel with Christ and his beloved. Perhaps it's not that one must exclusively seek the other, or vice versa, But that from the beginning, we were made for unity with one another, so that apart, both redeemer and redeemed are left wanting. We are lost, until we are united, in Spirit and in Truth. Perhaps this life of discipleship is a delightful dance between seeking and being sought, between the lifelong search for God in his Word and his creation and the lifelong process of being found by him when we stray.

So perhaps that is why when it comes to following Jesus, Some questions are better answered with an invitation: "Come and See." This beautiful relationship between divine lover and beloved is hard to explain. The paradox between the blessing we receive when we give ourselves, the balance between dying to self and gaining new life, the mystery surrounding the ugliness of the cross and its saving beauty is much easier to understand if you come and see and experience it for yourself.

That's why our brand new welcome ministry is called "Come and See." As one of our four five-year Vision Priorities here at All Saints, a task force has been gathering over the last year or so to ask the question, "How do we effectively welcome others to come and be a part of this community in Christ we call All Saints?" They grappled with the terms "witness" and "evangelism," which, to newcomers, can sound vague at best or scary at worst. So instead, they turned to this very passage in John where the invitation is simply to "Come and See."

It's an active invitation - it conveys the imperative to come, give Jesus a chance. It's an open invitation - no coercion, no theological debates - just check it out. It's experiential - "Come; be a part of the gathered community, see, hear, feel it for yourself. You might just find something you've been looking for. Or, instead, you might discover that you discover a place to let yourself be found.

God knows we're not perfect - the rag tag Body of Christ. We're not better than anyone or holier than thou. We may be missing the mark. But we're showing up; we're opening ourselves up. We're meeting Christ and meeting one another where we are. And in that meeting, something beautiful is

happening. In this gathering - here, and out among our neighbors in need - the kingdom is happening, in small, but powerful ways. It's something to see. It's worth stopping in for.

There's a story of a rich donor visiting Calcutta who met Mother Teresa. She pulled out her checkbook and said "How can I help you in your work?" Mother Teresa pressed the checkbook back into the woman's purse, took her by the hand and said, "Come and see." She led the woman into an impoverished slum, and found a hungry, frail child. "Care for her," Theresa told her. The woman took the child in her lap, cleaned her face, and fed her. That simple act alone was transformative. Teresa said "When we care for a child, we are caring for Jesus. When we love the unloved, we are loving Jesus."

Come and see. See how we see Christ in the faces of the needy, and in one another... How we seek God's Word in our study of the scriptures... How we're rearranging the priorities of this world so that God takes first place. How in worship we celebrate the unity between redeemer and redeemed, the delicate dance between the divine lover and his beloved. In today's Gospel, when he accepts Philip's invitation to "Come and see," Nathanael was astounded when he learned that in Jesus, he had already been found - Jesus saw him when he was there under the fig tree.

Jesus didn't notice him because he was in town, feeding the poor. He didn't choose him as a disciple because he was in the synagogue teaching righteousness from Torah, He chose him because he chose him. Found him, just sitting under a tree. That alone was enough to shock Nathaniel into a great declaration of faith: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" But Jesus answered, "You will see greater things than these." "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

This somewhat obscure statement is a reference to Genesis 28 when Jacob dreams of a ladder extending from heaven to earth, covered with the angels of God. Jesus is saying, "Nathanael, you will see - I'm no ordinary Rabbi. I AM the ladder between heaven and earth. The veil that once separated the two has been lifted, and it will be revealed before your very eyes." This Nazarene Teacher we follow is not just another guru, he is the bridge between heaven and earth. He is the Way, The Truth and the Life who brings wandering souls back to the Father.

We saw this when the heavens opened at his Baptism in the River Jordan, the disciples saw this when he healed with a touch and revived the dead and the desperate. We see it on the cross, where in his death he bought us life, and in his rising, he abolishes the power of death. This lifelong dance of seek-and-find is a real, actual, vital relationship with our Creator, made possible through the love and sacrifice of the Word Made Flesh.

So today, whether you're the one seeking him, whether you're feeling that gentle tug in your heart to know him more intimately, to search his wisdom more deeply...or whether you're here, asking to be found, feeling a bit lost, or maybe just a bit distant right now, ready to crack open the hard shell and let Christ back into your heart...you're still in the dance. You're still in the game. You're taking part in the vital union with your redeemer for which you were made, and for which he was made flesh,