

## Sermon, January 17, 2021

Good morning! Welcome to stay at home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, MD. I am Pastor Scott Robinson and today we welcome Debi and Sean Beachy who are providing special music. Hopefully before too long we can worship in person again. Meanwhile if you would like to help support our ministries and benevolence commitments, you can donate through our web site or Facebook page. Please note our annual congregational meeting will be a virtual Zoom event two weeks from today at noon. You will be sent the Zoom invitation and the number for those who want to participate by telephone.

Now today's stupid joke.

On the Retired Pastor's Blog this week, one colleague asked the question, "What do you hope people will say about you fifty years from now?" One pastor wrote, I hope they'll say, "He was a hard-working person of great faith." Another wrote, I hope they'll say, "She devoted her life to serving the poor and needy." I wrote, I hope they'll say, "Scott sure looks good for his age."

*Music*

**The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Lord God, you showed your glory and led many to faith by the works of your Son. As he brought gladness and healing to his people, grant us these same gifts and lead us also to perfect faith in him, Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.**

A reading from First Corinthians, the sixth chapter. "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything. "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food," and God will destroy both one and

the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The two shall be one flesh."

But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body.

**Here ends the reading.**

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### **The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to John, the first chapter.**

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."

### **The Gospel of the Lord.**

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**Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.**

The time after Epiphany in the church calendar is often called the season of light. Although I must admit, I didn't at first find any of today's assigned readings to be especially enlightening. In the first reading (that I skipped over) from First Samuel, we read that God cursed Eli's family for eternity because of some bad parenting. To me, that's a troubling notion about our God, otherwise known for forgiveness and understanding and not punishing children for the sins of their parents.

In our reading from First Corinthians, Paul lambasted the people for promiscuity—a practice for which the Corinthians were well known. In fact in their honor, Greek-speakers invented the verb Corinthianize, which meant to engage in hedonism and immorality. I found the Gospel conversations among Philip, Nathanael and Jesus to be awkward at best. And that's when I realized I hardly knew anything about Philip or Nathanael. Do you?

According to the gospel of John, Philip was among the first disciples to be called, and he makes every New Testament list of the so-called "twelve"—the inner circle of Jesus' followers. In fact the way John tells it, Philip was THE first person to whom Jesus said, "Follow me." The name Philip is Greek in origin. It literally means, "Lover of horses."

Philip the disciple is often confused with the other Philip who shows up in the Book of Acts. That Philip, called The Evangelist, was one of the seven Deacons appointed by the early church.

According to John, Disciple Philip's home town was the seaside fishing village of Bethsaida, which means "House of Fishing." Not sure how the horses he loved figured in. That was also the hometown of fishermen Andrew and Peter and probably James and John.

Through a weird quirk in the lectionary, we'll read Mark's account of Jesus calling the first disciples next week. Oddly enough it doesn't sound anything like John's story today. In fact, neither Philip nor Nathanael are even mentioned.

Church tradition says Philip the Disciple went on to evangelize in Greece and Phrygia—a small western kingdom in what is now modern-day Turkey. They say he was martyred there, supposedly crucified on an upside-down cross. Philip today is the patron saint of Uruguay and Luxembourg, as well as hat makers and pastry chefs. And I have no idea why.

Finding out anything about Nathanael was even more difficult. For one thing, he is mentioned only in the first and last chapters of the Gospel of John, and nowhere else in the Bible. We are told he was from Cana, the small town where Jesus changed water into wine at a wedding reception. Cana is six miles southwest of Bethsaida. Scholars have wondered for centuries why Nathanael's name doesn't appear in lists of the twelve from Matthew, Mark, Luke or the Book of Acts.

But they note that a disciple named Bartholomew DOES show up in those lists, but never in the gospel of John. Some think maybe they were the same guy who went by two different names, but that seems unlikely since both names are Aramaic. Sure, Simon Peter was called both Simon and Peter. But Shimon is Hebrew and Petros is Greek. Others, including me, have a different theory.

We recognize that bartolomaios was not a given name in biblical times. It instead was a Hellenized form of Bar-Tolmai, an Aramaic phrase meaning “Son of Tolmai.” Tolmai means furrowed, or wrinkled.

So much like Jesus called Peter Simon son of John and a Mary was called Magdalene, meaning Mary from the town of Migdol, this disciple may have been named Nathanael, but to distinguish him from other Natahniel’s, was called by others the “son of one who makes furrows,” i.e. a farmer. Or maybe he was called son of the wrinkled one. Let’s hope not.

In any case, Bartholomew didn’t seem to do or say anything special in Matthew, Mark, Luke or Acts. Nathanael means “Gift from God” but his gift was certainly NOT the Gift of Gab. Because you just heard pretty much everything Nathanael said and did in the gospel according to John. Although he does go fishing in the last chapter.

Today we are told Nathanael recognized Jesus as Rabbi, Son of God and King of Israel just because he saw him under a fig tree. Really? That’s odd. Especially since Rabbi was not a title given to anyone until long after Jesus’ death and resurrection and King of Israel is a title Jesus never claimed for himself. In fact he will make it clear to Pontius Pilate several chapters from now that his kingdom is NOT even of this world.

Tradition says Nathanael/Bartholomew, aka the farmer’s son, later did mission work in India and Armenia and maybe was with Philip in Greece and Turkey. He too was martyred, but nobody seems to know where or how. He is the patron saint of the Armenian Apostolic Church, as well as plasterers and nervous disorders.

And that’s about all I know, so I was prepared to admit at this point in this morning’s sermon that based on today’s readings, “Sorry folks, I got nothin’.”

But then I wondered if maybe the most significant thing for us about Nathanael and Bartholomew is that the Bible DOESN'T tell us anything special or heroic about them. Or him. He is just the son of a farmer.

The Church has had many gifted preachers, theologians, composers, poets, philosophers, artists and musicians over the centuries. There have been miraculous healers, philanthropists and self-sacrificing missionaries and martyrs.

Names like Justin, Stephen, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Francis, Calvin, Cranmer, Knox, Wesley and Mother Theresa come to mind. Tomorrow our nation commemorates the life and ministry of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who I consider among the greatest orators, social activists and civil rights champions of my lifetime, if not all time.

There have been many Lutheran Church greats as well over the centuries, like Martin himself and his wife Katy; theologians like Philip Melancthon and Paul Tillich; Composers like Bach, Handel and Mendelssohn; Philosophers like Hegel, Kant, and Kierkegaard; personal heroes and role models like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Elizabeth Fedde; Dag Hammersjold; Linus Pauling and Albert Schweitzer, just to name a few.

Fact is, the Christian Church has been blessed with many accomplished and gifted leaders in its history. But the backbone of the Church has really always been the ordinary folks.

The sons and daughters of farmers and fishermen, who have grown the church from a rag-tag group of nobodies from Podunk towns in Galilee, to 2.3 billion people today scattered across seven continents.

The mostly ordinary people, whom Christ found and called to follow him. Even though most haven't necessarily worked wonders, preached brilliant motivational sermons or composed or sung beautiful music.

The church has been built by the kind of folks who don't usually get their own chapters in Bibles, or text books. Ordinary folks like you and me who have been given faith, which has become an important part of their everyday lives.

Which brought to my attention another thing in this weird reading from John that I at first overlooked. While it was Jesus who found Philip, and also first spotted Nathanael under that tree; But Nathanael only became a follower because Philip invited him. And Phil was also just a regular guy. Who recognized the significance that Jesus Christ, Son of God had in his life. And suggested him to Nathanael, saying, "come and see."

According to the Hartford Institute of Religious Research, forty percent of Americans surveyed say they attend church regularly. But independent research revealed only twenty percent of them actually do. Statistics show that eighty-five percent of those who attend a church for the first time do so because someone they know invited them. Typically a friend, family member, neighbor or co-worker. That's how many of you got to St. Mark's, even though Lutherans as a rule aren't very good at inviting people to church. In fact one study showed that the average Lutheran invites someone to church only about once every twenty-three and a half years. And sadly, even if that is accurate, many of us are overdue.

According to a survey by the Barna Group, 82 percent of people invited to church by someone they know actually will come. And the coolest thing about St. Mark's is that those who come once, usually come back.

I know, this conversation sounds premature. Why talk about evangelism, when we aren't even worshipping in person yet? But hopefully it won't be too long before we can start to gather together again. Maybe with masks, social distancing, open windows and no singing, at least for a while. Church so-called experts these days warn that the post-pandemic American congregation may not look like the church we are accustomed to. For one thing, they say we can expect our numbers to be down by at

least thirty percent, and it will probably take many months or even years to recover, if ever.

But I think I know this congregation, and I am much more optimistic than that. Because we are mostly ordinary folks of great faith. Sons of farmers and fishermen. Republicans, democrats and independents. Business leaders. Teachers. Health care professionals. Homemakers, Students and retirees. People willing to help those who need help. To comfort others in times of sadness and loss. To celebrate life's victories and successes together. And to welcome outsiders, as insiders.

People who like to worship together. Teach and learn together. Work and laugh together; and sing and pray together. People much like Philip, who have also found something very special here in the Christian faith, and in this congregation. People who also aren't afraid now and then to turn to a friend, or even a stranger... and say, "Come and see."

Amen

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