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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Nathanael and Philip

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” (John 1:46, RSV)

This morning’s story is about two humble, fallible folk who find Jesus, and in finding him, they start upon a path that will one day make them into saints, inheritors of God’s kingdom, and everlasting residents of heaven. I like this story of Nathanael and Philip because they seem to be people like us and like our friends and people we love. For we too are humble, fallible people in many ways. But if we are Christians, we have thrown in our lot with Jesus and he means to make some great of us. So I think the story of Nathanael and Philip is a hopeful story.

In the course of time, these two disciples become known as “saints.” They have their own feast days. On our Lutheran calendar, the feast of St. Philip is May 1 and the feast of St. Bartholomew (as Nathanael is also called) is August 24. So, they are saints. But that is more toward the end of their story. Here, in this morning’s reading, they are at the start of their walk with Jesus. They are beginning disciples. They are likeable, but rather in the way that toddlers are lovely. They are just beginning to walk — enthusiastic about it, but not yet perfectly balanced, not yet agile, not yet athletes for the Lord. They will be saints one day, but for now, they are beginning disciples.

Nathanael represents that good, plain soul who does not yet know Jesus, but has been living a good life anyway and is *ready* to begin following Jesus. He is salt of the earth. He is a plain speaker. Jesus says of him that there is no guile in him.

The other fellow, Philip, represents the imperfect preacher, which means that he represents each of us — not just people like me who stand in the pulpit, but each and every Christian, for we are all called to speak up for Jesus as best we can. Philip was not an eloquent preacher at this early stage of life. In fact, he says just a few words to Nathanael, and he gets some of those few words wrong. But there is something good on his heart he wants to share with his friend Nathanael. So he hastens to Nathanael, blurts out his good news in whatever fashion he can, and God gives grace to his simple words — grace enough to win a soul to Christ!

To these two imperfect disciples Jesus promises that they shall one day see wonderful things — things that will thrill their hearts, a vision that will astonish and inspire them. This promise belongs to you and me too. At this stage in the game, we might be flawed disciples of Jesus, but let us go on walking with him.

He can use us, he can accept our work and draw forth good from it, and he can give us a vision one day that will signify to us that we have made it into heaven, into the very presence of the One on whom the angels ascend and descend and sing their songs of reverence.

Now, let's linger a bit with Nathanael.

NATHANAEL

When I think of Nathanael, I think of Carol's grandfather, Norman Zembower. What Jesus said of Nathanael could be said of him: he was a person in whom there was "no guile." You might be able to think of people like that in your life. I hope so. Grandpa was a straight-shooter, a plain talker. There was a simplicity to him and a straightforwardness. He was not deceptive. He did not cast around for some politic thing to say. He was a man of few words, but when he spoke, you could trust that he was speaking truly, from his heart.

So I count it a high compliment when Jesus says of Nathanael that he was guileless. You could take the man at his word. He was a man who was built for truth. His yea was a yea and his nay was a nay.

But there was something else about Nathanael. Not only is he plain-speaking, but also you can tell that he is a man of the Bible. He was learned in Israel's scriptures. His famous question, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" was not meant to put down that town. Nazareth was a town like other towns, like, say, your hometown. There must be a million towns and villages like Nazareth on our earth. No, the problem was not Nazareth, but rather Philip's claim that he had found the Messiah but that this Messiah came from that town or any town not named "Bethlehem." For the Messiah does not come from Nazareth but from Bethlehem. That's what the Bible says:

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. (Micah 5:2, RSV)

So, Nathanael lets Philip know where he stands. He pulls no punches. He is not about to follow some new-fangled Messiah. He wants the real thing. He wants the Messiah from Bethlehem.

In Nathanael, we are dealing with a simple man of truth who knows his Bible and says what he means and means what he says. Our world is blessed to have such people. He does not yet know Jesus, but he is a good man nonetheless. He will make a good disciple of our Lord. There are many such good people in our world.

PHILIP

Now, let's turn to Philip. I love the name of our congregation: Immanuel. But I would not have minded if we had been named "St. Philip Lutheran Church," because Philip is a good model for our congregation, for our Sunday School teachers, congregational leaders, and each of us in this dear church. Philip is that large-hearted soul who is eager to share good news. Nothing miserly about Philip, nothing cold and dead about his heart. He finds Someone who has stirred him in his depths. But he is not one to keep his good news to himself. He does not have the instinct of the hermit, content to head out to the desert or the mountain and to meditate on God all alone. No, Philip's heart is generous. He finds his Messiah, and quick! He is off to share the news! He has a friend, and how can he let his friend go deprived of the Gospel? What kind of a friend would he be if he left Nathanael parched and dry, without the good news of the Messiah?

So, Philip hastens to Nathanael and begins preaching to him. But he gets things wrong, in two ways. First, he refers to Jesus as "the son of Joseph." We can't blame Philip for this. That's probably how most folks thought of Jesus: Jesus was the "carpenter's son," the son of Joseph. But the fullness of our faith is that Jesus is not the son of Joseph, but rather the Son of God. It is a key element of our Christian faith, but Philip fails to speak of Jesus this way. His testimony to Jesus is flawed and immature and literally wrong, but he speaks from the heart and God blesses his testimony.

The other way in which Philip is wrong is this business of Nazareth. He did not know that Jesus had been born in Bethlehem. He did not know that the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem fulfilled the ancient prophecy about the Messiah. He had heard that Jesus was from Nazareth, and so that's what he passed on to Nathanael. What else can he do? He speaks the Gospel to Nathanael in the language that is natural to him and which makes sense to him and which accords with his present understanding of things. And in the end, his flawed testimony wins his friend to Jesus.

Likewise for us. We do not need to be polished theologians or learned Bible scholars to begin sharing Jesus. If we needed to wait to become those fancy folks, then most of us would never make it and the sharing of the good news of Jesus would languish. Philip spoke of Jesus as best he could. I bet Nathanael could tell that this Jesus had touched the heart of Philip. And that was good enough. When Philip answered Nathanael's complaint about how can anything good come from Nazareth with the simple words, "Come, and see," well, that was good enough. Philip spoke from the heart about Jesus, and that is what we need.

This story reminds me of one of our hymns in our worship book — the hymn *Hark, the Voice of Jesus Calling* (LBW 381). I've always liked that verse that says:

If you cannot speak like angels,
if you cannot preach like Paul,

you can tell the love of Jesus;
you can say he died for all.
If you cannot rouse the wicked
with the judgment's dread alarms,
you can lead the little children
to the Savior's waiting arms. (Verse 2)

Few of us can preach like Paul, but many of us can preach like Philip. We can say to others, "Come and see the One who has touched my soul."

JESUS

Now, in finding Jesus, Nathanael and Philip have found Someone who is going to change everything for them. It will not be easy, but it will be good. In this story, they are first meeting Jesus. He is going to lead them on journeys that will weave their way toward Jerusalem and toward the heartbreak of Golgotha. But also he is going to lead them on a journey that will take them all the way to heaven someday.

The gap between Jesus and these two disciples is as great as the gap between heaven and earth. He is a better man than them. I don't think there is any way around this. Jesus is simply a better man than plain-speaking Nathanael and large-hearted Philip. Whatever virtues they have, Jesus has them in an even more beautiful way and to a higher degree.

You might answer, "Well, yes, Jesus was better. But that's because he was God." But I fear that we miss the majesty of the Incarnation of our God if we suppose that it was somehow *easier* for Jesus to be good than it is for you and me. Jesus was *fully* human. That means he was fully vulnerable to sin and temptation, to exhaustion, pain, and disappointment. He knew the kinds of struggles that we know. It's just that he never gave up. He never gave in. He continually chose the good. He continually practiced love and self-sacrifice, all the way to giving his life for the world, that you and I might have so hope in life.

Compared to him, Nathanael and Philip are ordinary guys. They do not have the learning of St. Paul, they do not have the brilliance of St. Augustine, they do not have the piety of St. Francis. They are simply ordinary folk. But my! What a ministry and what destiny Jesus has in mind for them.

When Nathanael meets Jesus, Nathanael soon acknowledges Jesus is his Lord. There was something about the fig tree that did it. We do not know the details of why the fig tree was so decisive, but we do see Nathanael right in character. He is guileless and so he immediately says what is on his mind:

⁴⁹Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God!
You are the King of Israel!" (John 1:49, RSV)

Jesus then promises Nathanael that he will see something greater than a fig tree. And this does not seem to refer to our Lord's Transfiguration. The inner three disciples — Peter, James, and John — are privileged to see that glorious sight, while Nathanael is left out. But no matter: Nathanael is destined to see the same glorious vision that Peter, James, and John are destined to see.

And perhaps this is why I like this story so much. These two disciples, Philip and Nathanael, are *not* among the inner three. They are not the forward disciples. They are not the rock upon which Jesus will build his church, like Peter. They are not the beloved disciple to whom Jesus entrusts his mother, Mary, as he is dying. They are not present at the empty tomb to be the first hearers of the Gospel: "He is not here! He is risen!"

If Philip and Nathanael are distinguished at all in this world it is by this one personal fact about them: Jesus knows them, counts them his friends, uses them in quiet ways in his ministry, and promises them that they shall see the angels one day:

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." (John 1:51, NRSV)

It is the same with you and me too. There is a vast crew of disciples who are ordinary followers of Jesus. They might not be eloquent, but rather plain-speakers like Nathanael. They might not even be hundred percent accurate in their theology and testimony to Jesus, yet they love Jesus and want to win others to him, like Philip. You and I might be part of that vast crew of ordinary disciples. But the promise Jesus gave to that ordinary disciple Nathanael is one that he gives to you and me too: One day we shall see with our own eyes, and not for another, the very King of kings and Lord of lords, the One before whom the seraphim and cherubim love to sing their Sanctus throughout all eternity. That is, one day we shall see Jesus in heaven and then we shall be satisfied fully.