

Homily, St. Andrew's
Proper 2B, Sunday, January 18, 2015
John 1:43-51

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

It is already past the middle of January. Christmas lights and decorations are put away, the bills are just starting to arrive, and our refrigerators are recovering nicely. New Years' resolutions are already forgotten as we settle into the winter. In our church year, the waiting and preparation for God to arrive has past, the excitement of the miraculous birth has come and gone and our lives can mostly just return to normal as we settle into our journey with Jesus. It is one of my favourite times of the year. With Jesus' baptism last Sunday, his life of ministry has officially begun and today that ministry takes off as Jesus begins calling people, calling us, to discipleship.

Today Jesus journeys to Galilee where he finds Philip and commands him to follow, which apparently he does without hesitation. It is then Philip, not Jesus, who recruits Nathanael. He does so by sharing what he knows of Jesus' identity, in a loaded, 2-part statement. First - Philip identifies Jesus as the fulfillment of all scripture and the fulfillment of all hope for a saviour: "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote..." Secondly, Philip identifies Jesus by his paternity and his hometown: "Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." It is a perfect combination of the human and the divine and encapsulates the tension and mystery of Incarnation beautifully.

Nathanael's first reaction is skepticism as he responds to Jesus' earthly pedigree, or lack thereof, and barely hears, or so it seems, any cosmic connection. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" he scoffs. Nazareth is a small, rural village - not the locale from which one would expect greatness would come. Nathanael is not impressed, but Philip doesn't argue the point. Philip simply accepts Nathanael's doubt and offers an invitation. It is the same invitation Jesus offered to the very first disciples just a few verses ago and one that is repeated throughout the Gospel of John: "Come and see." Like Jesus before him, Philip invites Nathanael to see for himself the truth of his first identification of Jesus - as the fulfillment of scripture - despite his doubt based on Jesus' human origins.

There can be a great deal of power in an invitation as simple as: "come and see". Such an invitation is open, hospitable and confident while not being attached to the outcome. Invitation doesn't denigrate or deny the beliefs or convictions of the one offering the invitation while allowing the one receiving it to bring all of them self, skepticism and all, to the experience. Invitation is different from manipulation because doesn't carry with it any ulterior motive. Invitation is about honest sharing, not trying to convert. "How someone responds to [the invitation] is up to him or her, and up to God." (Robinson, 119) Offering an open and honest invitation to "come and see" means we have to trust that what the respondent will encounter will make all the argument needed. It is about trusting that an encounter with Jesus is what's needed to convert and that part is not up to us.

"Non-anxious evangelism"... this is a phrase I heard a few years back that I think applies well to Philip's invitation. It came from a church planter named Karen who had started a new Anglican (or Episcopal)-Lutheran church, first as a tea shop and then developed it into a full

parish and community centre. It's called "Church of the Apostle's" or COTA in Seattle. When I met her, Karen talked about the importance of non-anxious evangelism as distinct from what she called "vampire evangelism"... as in "we are going to suck your blood! And your time... and your money... we need to feast on you so that we can live!" Non-anxious evangelism, on the other hand, is about confidence and peace. It's about passion for the Good News of God in Christ, as lived out in word and sacrament here in the church... here at St. Andrew's. Non-anxious evangelism is not about our need to get something, it is about our love of giving because we have already received. And it is about our conviction that "coming and seeing" will, or at least may, mean an encounter with Jesus that can transform lives. We invite others into it because we ourselves have been and continue to be, transformed and so we can't help but to share that gift, in the form of invitation, with those in our lives and those we encounter.

After offering the invitation, Philip drops out of today's Gospel while the story continues with a conversation between Jesus and Nathanael. Nathanael has taken Philip up on the offer it seems, and upon approaching Jesus, Jesus speaks first in addressing him: "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael is identified as a faithful and righteous believer, an Israelite, despite his questioning. Indeed, with Jesus' description of him as one "in whom there is no deceit," I wonder if it's because of his questioning that Nathanael is so honored? He didn't try to cover up his doubts or pretend that he believed something that he really didn't. Maybe his comment, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" was a little harsh or a little overly sarcastic, but at least it wasn't deceitful. I wonder if he was surprised that the object of his scorn, like the disciple who witnessed to him, not only didn't react badly to his question, but took it seriously. Jesus, like Philip, isn't fazed by the questioning... which is good, because Nathanael's questions continue: "Where did you come to know me?"

Nathanael is not the kind of disciple who accepts easily. His questions are a bit reminiscent of Thomas - that famous disciple who will refuse to take his friends' word that Jesus resurrects. Thomas is also a little obstinate, holding out to see and touch and know for himself. But maybe like Thomas, Nathanael's honest questioning means that Jesus reveals more of himself and has more of a conversation with him than he did with those who accept and believe easily. All Jesus said to Philip was "follow me," and Philip was a disciple... no fuss, no muss, no discussion, no uncomfortable questions, or soul searching. What a blessing and a gift to be a quick and easy believer like Philip.

Nathanael's blessing and gift as a questioning and resistant believer is that he talks with Jesus more. He wants to understand the human and divine connection and he wants to hear from Jesus about how he knows him. He might as well have asked: "Do you love me, God?" How many other disciples through the centuries - how many of us here today - wonder if God knows us and if God cares about us? How many of us want the courage and conviction of Nathanael to ask: "Where did you come to know me?" Why me? The good news is Jesus' faithfulness. Jesus doesn't say... "it doesn't matter" or "how dare you ask!" Jesus answers: "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."

We don't know why the fig tree is so significant and so the meaning of Jesus' answer is unclear. What we do know is that it meant everything to Nathanael, because it elicits from him a complete confession of faith: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Nathanael recognizes Jesus' full identity as the Christ, as God's own Son. He uses different words

than Philip before him - and maybe that matters. Maybe how Philip understood Jesus - as the fulfillment of scripture - isn't what Nathanael needed. Nathanael needed to understand Jesus as the Son of God, which isn't opposed to Philip's description, it's just a little different. And Nathanael needed to find out for himself. Both disciples come to faith, they just get there in their own time and in their own way. They both have the unique encounter with Jesus that they need to come to faith in Jesus as the Christ.

To Nathanael's confession of Jesus as the Son of God, Jesus promises that his eyes will be opened to even greater sights: "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." This is the promise of the life of discipleship - that something even better is coming, not just as life everlasting, but in the fulfillment of our dreams for our lives in the here and now and our vision for what our community and the world could be - this year, in the coming decades, maybe just later this afternoon. It all starts with the invitation to "come and see."

May we have the courage and confidence to practice the kind of non-anxious evangelism Philip did by inviting others into an encounter with Jesus. May we trust that as we do our part, Jesus will do his and honour each person's varying needs, diverse journeys and differing understandings. And through this living out of our faith, may we one day see the heavens open and the glory of God pour forth.

It all begins... [at the font]... the beginning of our call into ministry and mission... As we remember God's faithfulness to us in the promises made in baptism, let us renew our commitment to God in the baptismal covenant.