

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 01/14/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Second Sunday After the Epiphany

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, January 14th

John 1:43-51

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Come and see: Skepticism transformed into faith

This week's lection from John's Gospel is the bridge between the testimony of John the Baptist and narrative of Jesus' ministry. It features the call of Nathanael which is somewhat different from the call to discipleship found in the synoptic Gospels. Philip tells Nathanael about Jesus. Nathanael responds as a skeptic. Philip invites Nathanael to come and see for himself. One encounter with Jesus transforms Nathanael from skeptic to believer.

John 1:43-51 Commentary

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.

The opening of the text grounds this narrative in the preceding events concerning John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus and the call of Andrew and his brother Simon Peter (1:19-42). Jesus was not yet in Galilee suggesting the call of the Andrew and Peter along the shore of the Sea of Galilee in Mark 1:16-20 was a subsequent call. Unlike the Fourth Gospel writer's account of Andrew and another unnamed disciple of John seeking out Jesus after John the Baptist referred to Him as the Lamb of God (1:29) and Andrew subsequently bringing his brother to meet Jesus, the call of Philip is the first example of an express call where Jesus takes the initiative. We also read how Philip was from the same place as Andrew and Peter (perhaps their birthplace). We do not know if Philip knew Andrew and Peter.

⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

Philip now seeks out Nathanael and shares his testimony of Jesus. Did Philip already know him? Nathanael is later described as Nathanael of Cana in Galilee. Following this encounter between Jesus and Nathanael, the narrative immediately picks up with the miracle of the water being turned into wine at the wedding in Cana. Nathanael is only mentioned one more time in John as part of the group who Jesus would make his third resurrection appearance to in Galilee after the group went back to fishing (21:2). Philip's confession of Jesus is profound although still inadequate. The reference to Moses is an allusion to Deuteronomy 18:18 where Moses wrote what God said to him: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him." The priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem to investigate John the Baptist ask him if he was "the Prophet" (1:19-21).

⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

Nathanael's response is skepticism. Galilee itself was often known as "Galilee of the Gentiles." Nathanael was from Cana, a village in Galilee, and thus there may have been some rivalry between Nazareth and Cana. Or perhaps there was some existing prejudices being revealed. Regardless, Nazareth was insignificant and did not fulfill any of the prophecies concerning the Messiah. Philip's response was the same as Jesus to Andrew and the unnamed disciple of John the Baptist earlier in 1:39: "come and see."

⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸ Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you."

As a parallel to the Samaritan woman at the well (chapter 4), Jesus knew something about Nathanael that no other human could know. Jesus describes Nathanael literally "as an Israelite in whom there is no guile or cunning" (*dolos*). Even the father of all Israelites, Jacob, used cunning to steal his brother Esau's blessing (Genesis 27:35). The same Greek word *dolos* is used in the Septuagint translation of Genesis. There will shortly be a reference to Jacob's dream in v.51. Naturally, Nathanael asked Jesus how he knew such and the response provides even more supernatural knowledge.

To sit under the fig tree is an expression that carries more meaning than the obvious. The phrase "under their vine and fig tree" is repeated three times in Scripture: Micah 4:4, 1 Kings 4:25, and Zechariah 3:10. In Micah 4:4 the expression "but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid" describes the freedom and independence God's people enjoy under His rule. The fig tree was also a place Jews would sit in the shade and meditate on Scripture. Perhaps Nathanael had an epiphany moment while in the Word that only God would know about.

⁴⁹ Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰ Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these."

The encounter with Jesus was enough for Nathanael to confess Him as the "Son of God" and "King of Israel" – a higher Christology than Philip's description! Jesus essentially says you believe because I knew something about you that know one could know – well *you ain't seen nothing yet!*

⁵¹ And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

While speaking to Nathanael, Jesus uses the plural form of "you" twice in this sentence. If there is any earlier intended connection between Nathanael and Jacob, here is another. Jesus describes the Son of Man as being the conduit between heaven and earth – the ladder that Jacob dreamed about (Genesis 28:10-17) is Jesus. The promise made at Bethel by God to Jacob is thus fulfilled by Jesus: "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. ¹⁴ Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 28:13-14).

Reflection and Application

This text reveals some insights on discipleship and disciple-making. Unlike the classic "follow me" call of Jesus found in the synoptic Gospels; John provides some additional details. In this week's text we read how Jesus called Philip but then it was Philip who went out and found Nathanael. This illustrates the role that Christ's disciples play

in continuing to find other prospective disciples. We are also called to faithfulness in this task but as in the case of Philip and Nathanael, the ultimate responsibility for the fruitfulness of this task is God. As the skeptical Nathanael raised his objections about the identity of Jesus, Philip responded simply with “come and see.” After the subsequent encounter with Jesus, Nathanael was ready to confess Him as the Son of God – something even greater Christological significance than Philip understood Jesus to be. The simple response from Philip is noteworthy. Philip did not engage Nathanael in an argument but simply invited him to come and see for himself and to make up his own mind. In John, evangelism is not a set of leading questions or an apologetic argument but simply an invitation to come and see. Like Philip, our job is to invite. The rest is up to God.

While Philip’s response to Nathanael was a verbal one, living out the Gospel with our lives can also serve as a visual invitation to “come and see.” When people see communities living out, in unity, the truth of the Gospel, it offers an alternative vision for life and an invitation to learn more. Perhaps this is more helpful to the skeptic than an initial unrequested presentation of truth.

It goes without saying that when we extend the invitation to “come and see,” we must be willing to ask the question, what are we inviting others to experience? Are we inviting someone to a program, an event, a concert, a private club, a website? What will they experience? Entertainment, polite exclusion, judgementalism, legalism? What will they hear? A band, stories, doctrine, a watered-down, milquetoast version of the Gospel? Or will they experience a community called by God to worship Him either participating in an active worship service balancing Word and Sacrament or engaging the community in mission for Christ?

