

## **Expectations vs Reality**

John 1:43-51

It's the new year and we're only a couple weeks in, which means those of us who make resolutions or commitments or promises to ourselves that we plan to fulfill in some capacity throughout 2024 are probably still sticking to the plan—still taking time to exercise or make more home cooked meals or carve out time to meditate each day or whatever it is that you want to do to change or better connect or grow or improve your health or reflect more or shift perspectives. But we don't have to be the sort of people who make new year's resolutions to understand what it's like to make a plan, to make a commitment or a promise and then discover that getting from A to B is a lot more complicated than we originally imagined. Our expectations of what something will be like can often outweigh the reality. We might think that some hard work will lead to success, but as all of us, I'm sure, have learned along the way, even hard work can be interrupted by unexpected challenges, failures, problems, and obstacles. We might reach success, but not without a lot of unpredictable ups and downs and twists on the journey.

In the same way, we have expectations around people and events and situations. We expect the meal we order at the high end restaurant to be cooked to perfection and taste delicious. We expect that the trip we've been planning for months will be awe-inducing and rejuvenating and perhaps even enlightening. We expect our elected leaders to behave, represent us, and look out for us in particular ways. But, of course, expectation is not always reality. Sometimes the food is bad, or the flight is delayed and it rains the entire trip, or we despair that we ever voted for a particular leader.

This was the situation for the Jewish people who awaited the Messiah. Their expectation was that God's anointed one would be a powerful and influential leader. This being the case, the Messiah would probably be revealed in or near Jerusalem as it was a place of political and economic power, a place of religious authority, and it was home to the Temple, the dwelling place of God. And if this person didn't appear in Jerusalem, then it would probably be in a way that would emphasize and display their holy authority. In today's terms, this person might be leading a grand parade, or speaking to hundreds of thousands in a huge stadium and be available to view on every social media platform possible, or perhaps leading a huge march in protest of war and violence and oppression.

Given all this, it may not be so surprising that, as we heard in our scripture reading today, Nathanael was not so swayed by Philip's insistence that they had found "him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote" (John 1:45). What, after all, was so impressive about someone from the small village of Nazareth? His expectations of what the Messiah would be far outweighed this reality set before him. Nathanael was a straightforward guy who valued honesty and wasn't afraid to name his skepticism. And while this story focuses a great deal on Nathanael, we might want to take a step back and view Philip, as well.

Philip was called by Jesus directly. Jesus revealed himself to him and said “Follow me.” And Philip did. Now, we learn that Philip was from Bethsaida, the same city as Andrew and Peter and, if we take a step back again, we see that before Jesus came to Philip he had already invited Andrew and his brother Peter to follow him. So, maybe Andrew and Peter had met up with Philip before Jesus came to him and told Philip about having found the Son of God, and so Philip was already primed to accept Jesus’ call. But at any rate, news about Jesus, about the Messiah, about God’s Son and anointed one, was beginning to spread. And the way Jesus engaged with these potential followers wasn’t at all like the expectations they had in their minds. There was no grand parade, no king with a sword and crown riding in on horseback, no persuasive and engaging sermon in a big city square. There was just this humble man from a humble town, travelling by foot, inviting listeners into something totally new and unexpected. And how did Jesus do this? He simply said, “Come and see.” And from there, others said it for him: “Come and see.”

“Come and see” Jesus said to Andrew. And Andrew did. He followed Jesus in order to sit with him and have a conversation with him that lasted most of the day. Jesus didn’t have to put on a big show, he just had to invite. And Andrew was open to listening and learning and discovering how peace resided in this unassuming but captivating man. We don’t know what Andrew and Jesus talked about exactly—theology, or politics, or their Jewish upbringings, or the power of love—but whatever words they shared affected Andrew deeply and he invited his brother Peter to come meet Jesus and follow, as well.

And then Jesus went to Philip. “Follow me” he said. And we don’t know if Philip followed because he’d already talked with Andrew and Peter, or if there was just something about Jesus that stirred his curiosity, but whatever the case, Philip knew he had to tell his friend Nathanael. And when Nathanael expressed his skepticism, Philip didn’t give arguments or opinions or wax eloquent about Jesus’ biblical knowledge. He simply said “Come and see.” Philip knew he didn’t have to advertise Jesus; he knew that once Nathanael came and saw for himself he would understand. He would want to follow. And it wouldn’t require a big show or a flashy outfit or a trip to Jerusalem; he would follow Jesus because he would know Jesus for who he truly was and is. Not the expectation of him, but the powerful, if unadorned, reality. In fact, it doesn’t take long, once Nathanael meets Jesus, for him to proclaim Jesus the “Son of God” and “King of Israel.”

We can’t say what it is exactly that changes Nathanael’s mind about this Jesus from Nazareth. Perhaps it’s how Jesus seemed to know something distinct about Nathanael before they even really spoke. Or perhaps there’s something he recognized about Jesus from the scriptures he’d been taught through his whole life. But there’s something in the experience of actually seeing and meeting Jesus that gets Nathanael all excited. His doubt and questioning doesn’t lead him astray; it leads him right where he needs to be—in the presence of the one who came to save, to bring wholeness, to extend peace and show how love wins. And Jesus, for his part, essentially says to Nathanael, “if you

think this is great, just wait. There's more to come and see: heaven opening and angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

So what can we gain from this story of Andrew and Peter and Philip and Nathanael who came and saw and followed? Is it our task to say to others, "Come and see"? In many ways this can seem like a daunting process. But it's not a request for a lifelong commitment, it's simply an invitation. An invitation to see and learn and know and be present with something—someone—greater than us but also fully part of us.

Think of your own story: what made you come and see? Maybe Jesus called your grandparents to follow and they, in turn, called your parents, who called you. And maybe you have children or grandchildren who you have invited to come and see, as well. Or maybe you were invited by a friend who you wholeheartedly trust and respect. Or were confused by the Bible and decided to search out some answers. Or maybe you were feeling lonely and figured this church thing was worth a shot if it meant being in community with others. Maybe you just liked the church website enough to want to see what it's like offline, too. Or felt some sort of draw that you can't really explain with words but can still feel as this humming energy throughout your body. Whatever the specifics, something made you come and see. And not only come and see, but stay.

We are in the season of the church we call Epiphany. It's the period in the church calendar where we tend to focus on how Jesus was revealed to those in his own time and revealed to us still today. It's about finding Jesus and witnessing Jesus in ways that show him to be of God as revealed to us by God. We don't tend to think of Epiphany as a time when we find ourselves, the focus is more on the manifestation of Jesus as the Messiah, as God's anointed one.

But this story invites us to do both: finding Jesus in revelatory moments, or unexpected experiences, or invitational times, is also when you find yourself; when you choose to come and see you discover who you are, who you are called to be. I read an article recently by a Professor of Biblical Preaching who put it this way: it's "When you realize your identity as a follower, a disciple, and get a glimpse, perhaps a new glimpse — and here is the epiphany — of something you have not seen before when it comes to your own faith story, your own discipleship, your own concept of what it means to believe". It's this element of epiphany, I think, that has the power to turn "come and see" into "come and stay—and follow and believe." Because what is revealed is that God entered our world through Jesus not just to be *with us* but to be *one of us*. So maybe when you hear these stories of Jesus, when you look for Jesus, when Jesus is in some way revealed to you, when you experience something of the divine—an epiphany—you will simultaneously see something about yourself.

This is because we don't simply watch Jesus from a distance. When we come and see we come to experience and are moved and changed. We become part of a relationship. Epiphany, revelation... it isn't one-sided. We can't just watch Jesus and say from the sidelines, "Ooo... cool. Wow, Jesus!" We also have to ask "so what?" And we ask this for the sake of who we are as people who answer the invitation to "come and see and

follow me.” Maybe we don’t always have strong expectations of ourselves—we’re okay with sitting back and observing things from a distance. But what if, as we discover more about Jesus in this season of Epiphany, we also *anticipate* learning something about ourselves? It doesn’t have to be big. Self discovery, change, growth—sometimes it happens in striking, unforgettable or transcendent ways; sometimes in small, calculated or digestible ways. In either situation, something happens. Something revelatory, something divine.

So how do we do this? How do we open ourselves to Jesus being revealed in and through us? How do we learn something more about our own faith and desire to follow? Here’s where there’s one simple expectation of the invitation to come and see: you have to be present. Nathanael didn’t come and see by standing off to the side; he was fully present with Jesus: he may have had some skepticism, some doubts, some questions, but he also placed trust in Philip’s invitation to come and see. And his eyes and his heart were opened. He didn’t let his expectation of what the Messiah would be cloud what was actually in front of him.

In order to truly answer the invitation to come and see, we too must be present in the moment. We have to use our senses. Questions and doubts are allowed to be present (they always will be—there’s no avoiding it), but we must be careful not to bury our heads so deeply into what we *think* we want that we miss the reality we’re actually seeking. “Come and see” doesn’t happen in theory. The disciples, Nathanael, they wouldn’t have become followers if they stuck to only reading about the Messiah in scriptures. The same goes for us. We can’t go and see Jesus just by reading or watching from the sidelines. We have to move, to search, to be present and open to setting aside our expectations once we have come face to face with reality.

Jesus first says to his followers, “come and see.” This Epiphany season, come and see Jesus. Come and see God. But also, be present and see yourself. All of which might truly be epiphanies. And, I am guessing, nothing you expected. Amen.