

Sermon ✝ January 15, 2023

John 1:43-51

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The text is from the forty-sixth verse of the first chapter of the Gospel according to St. John, three simple words that constitute the entire sum and substance of the gospel: *"Come and see."*

In these Sundays between Christmas and Lent, we keep the Sundays of the Epiphany, that season in which God comes into the world in immodest fashion and invites us to share our humanity with his divinity, inviting us to see and to experience him.

This is the season of God's initiative, when, in answer to the questions who is God, and what does God want with us, we are invited, in the words of Philip, to *"come and see."*

Remember when Jesus found Philip and issued an invitation for Philip to join him? *"Follow me,"* said Jesus, and Philip did.

Earlier Jesus had invited the curious and somewhat skeptical disciples of John the Baptist to join him.

And to their questions, *"Are you the one? Are you really the one?"* . . . Instead of answering, *"See my cloud? See my wings? Of course I am the one,"* he said, *"Come and see..."* or, in today's words, *"Come check it out."*

Philip was so eager to share what he had found that he in turn invited Nathanael, but Nathanael, a tough customer, when he heard that Jesus was from Nazareth, a two-bit town, uttered his famous question, *"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"* By which he meant, *"Can anything good come out of so unlikely a place as Nazareth?"*

It was said in the way that some folks in the county talk about Washington Island . . . consternation mixed with condescension.

Now we all receive many invitations, and some we are inclined to decline. But Philip, not to be deterred, says, *"Come and see!"* *"Don't take my word for it, accept the invitation and see for yourself,"* he implies.

*"I cannot give you my belief, but I can encourage you to inspect, explore, and experience for yourself."*

Initiative, inquiry, imagination: that is the formula, the recipe, that is the biblical model and example for evangelism. It is the basis of the Christian tradition.

I am not imposing my truth upon you, but as both Jesus and Philip did, I am inviting you to come see for yourselves.

Think what would have happened if the shepherds had not gone to see for themselves what was going on in Bethlehem, what they would have missed, and we with them. *"Let us go even unto Bethlehem,"* they said, *"and see this thing which has come to pass."* They accepted the invitation the moment it was presented, and we have been singing their praises ever since.

Think of the kings, the magi, who decided not to rest content upon their research—or to stay in their libraries or labs during the holidays—but accepted the invitation of the star and journeyed and saw for themselves, and went away amazed.

Think of those fishermen who left their nets and their families and accepted Jesus' invitation to come and see, and followed him.

Epiphany reminds us that in Jesus it is God who seeks not simply shepherds, kings, and fishermen, but the likes of us as well.

It is God who takes the initiative, saying in those remarkable words, *"Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."*

This means you, you who are skeptical and you who are tired of your own skepticism and you who are so certain that you know all you need to know, and you who are certain that you know nothing.

You, me, we are the ones to whom Jesus gives his invitation, *"Come unto me..."*

Notice that in the invitations of Jesus and Philip to *"come and see"* have no pre-conditions attached. The invitations don't say, *"Come follow me once you have sufficient understanding, once you have settled all of the great questions, once you can prove that you are worthy enough or good enough, or once you have achieved a state of spiritual perfection or discernment."*

The invitations didn't propose any moral hoops to be leapt through, or hold out merit badges to be won for Jesus. Jesus invites, and we come not because we must, but because we may.

At the beginning of his ministry among us Jesus does not condemn, nor command, nor cajole us to come. He invites us to join him in the fullness of all that God has in store for all who love him.

Most of you have seen the famous Victorian painting of Jesus standing at the door, with the text, *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock"?* It has been reproduced many times.

Most people think that Jesus is asking to be let in, inviting himself into our homes and even into our hearts. But I think that it is quite the other way around—Jesus is knocking at the door in order to invite us to come outside and join with him.

He is not asking to come in, he is inviting us to come out and to go with him where he is to be found. That is an invitation that no one in his or her right mind and heart could refuse.

Epiphany is God's initiative; the invitation and opportunities are ours to accept.

Do you doubt it?

Do you not trust me?

Well then, "*Come and see*".