

John 1 The Call of Philip and Nathanael

“Follow me” The two words Jesus spoke to Philip, to call him as his disciple. If someone said that to us, perhaps our response would be “Where are we going?” Or maybe, “Why should I follow you?”

Let’s start with “why?” Philip should follow Jesus because he had heard the testimony of John the baptizer that this Jesus of Nazareth was much more than Joseph’s son, but the Son of God and the very lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world.

And so he followed. Though it appears he had time at some point to run and tell his friend Nathaniel aka Bartholemew.

But he has to explain why Nathanael should follow this Jesus guy. And so Philip tells him that it is because Jesus is the One Moses and the Prophets wrote about. This is the Messiah! Long foretold, the One to redeem Israel, to bring life and light! Who wouldn’t follow that guy!?

But Nathanael isn’t so sure. “He came from Nazareth?!” Not Jerusalem, not, to careful readers of the Old Testament, Bethlehem? But it doesn’t seem like Philip has a good answer for that, or perhaps isn’t particularly bothered with trying to answer him at all, just “come and see” and you won’t need an explanation.

So Nathanael trusts his friend and follows him to Jesus. Will he trust Jesus and follow after him?

As we read, Jesus impresses Nathanael with his omniscience and foresight, “yes I know all about you Nathanael and were you like to rest under trees.” Nathanael is amazed and gives a great confession: “Rabbi, Son of God and King of Israel.” So Jesus is now the Teacher, Rabbi, Divine, the Son of God, and has authority here among them, The King of Israel.

Sounds like Nathanael is in, no? “I’ll follow this guy wherever.”

Jesus, you can almost see the grin on his face, responds, “Really? That’s all it took..? just you wait and see what else I have in store...”

And off they go. They know not where, but only that if Jesus is there, it’s better than all the other places.

I assume the reason most of you are here is because you are Christians. Followers, disciples (in the Greek), of Jesus. You long to be where he is at. And, well, you’ve come to the right place as Jesus promises, where two or more are gathered in my name, there I am with them. Even moreso, in our Divine Services where his Body and blood come to us.

So, Christian, you are here because you want to be where Jesus is, now and forever, why is that? What convinced you of that? Was it a trustworthy friend who invited you to come and see who Jesus truly is? Strong, truthful, but oh so merciful?

Was it, like Nathanael, a miraculous, cataclysmic event that brought you to him? If so, well, good, and to steal Jesus’ words today: you ain’t seen nothing yet!

Or perhaps it wasn’t so grand at all. Maybe it was subtle reflection on the world, on time and eternity. Maybe it was stones in the ground and dusty manuscript evidence. Maybe, maybe, it was a call given when the waters and the Name of God was placed upon you. That you are his child, that his work is for you, that you are no longer your own, but bought with a price, and called into his family, his church? And if you think that makes you a second rate disciple, because you don’t have some grand experience, well I’m not so sure, it is Jesus who says, “Go make disciples of all nations baptizing and teaching...”

So that's the why – why do we follow Jesus? And I commend you to your own reflection on that. And if you struggle for an answer as to why you should follow Jesus, let's talk, and search those scriptures “come and see” who He is and why so many are willing to give their lives following him...

Now before we get to: “where is he leading us?” I offer one more sub question for us: “How do we follow him?” It was a simpler question for Philip, Nathanael, and the 12, naturally, for them it was to get up and go where he does. Along dusty roads. They may not have even bothered asking this question it was so obvious, however, I still think it relevant for them. For example, Judas followed him to that upper room, after he had wandered elsewhere to plot against him, so is a true follower only one who is parked where he is? Like the many who wanted him for bread and only what it could get them? Or is there more to it?

There is more to it, and this is where we come in. The roads we travel may be different. But we can still follow our Lord. John chapter 8: Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

We have his word. That is how you follow. We have his call, our call to be his children. Will we like Samuel answer, “Speak, for your servant hears.” Or are there more important voices to listen to?

We often talk about feeling called, an internal call – maybe to share that word with someone who doesn't know him. A call to want to grow deeper in his word or serve in a particular way. Good, feel called and compelled by his Word. Just make sure it is rooted in his Word, because other things can call us too, no? And not all things are worth following...

And it is this reason we also distinguish between that inner call and the external Divine Call, which is not based on feeling, but based on requirement, ability, and the people of God. So, for example, we externally call some of our teachers because they have been trained, vetted, and are willing (internal call) to serve. And how much more with Pastors! There are requirements, and they cannot decide on their own to be one, they must be externally called. This has biblical precedent as we see no Apostles were ever called by their opinion, but by Jesus, "Follow me!" He says to Philip. You think he was called? Sure was, externally.

Furthermore, the one vacancy in the 12 apostles, after Judas dies, in Acts 1 was not filled randomly. Yes, they cast lots, but not for random guys off the street. And so without them to Call or corroborate a Call as they did with Paul, there are no more apostles. We can't fill that Office anymore. Nor the office of Prophet as in the Old Testament.

But we do have the Office of the Public Ministry, those Called, not by themselves but by you, the Church, to publicly preach and administer the sacraments. In the scriptures you will see this office filled with terms like overseers, deacons, elders – we use the latin catch-all: Pastor, shepherd. But we see the biblical basis for this in Acts and in Paul's letters, which is also where we see the requirements for such offices. And so the apostolic Church around the world have the Keys to the Kingdom and imperfect sinners are called out of the Church to use those Keys. An external Call, a Call which can be revoked should that individual prove unworthy, I might add as well. And if it pains you that sinners who fail and screw up are called into this Office... I agree! I wish only perfect men filled this office... but there's only One perfect man – Jesus. And, God be praised, he IS the head of your Church, the head of the whole Church. But he, for some reason, made this Church of sinners for sinners and calls Eli's and Philips, and Nathanael's to serve. May

his grace be upon us who, the scriptures are so clear: have to give an account to him. Lord, have mercy!

So that's the Call to the Office of the public ministry. An internal call, desire to share God's Word, and an external Call by the Church.

But there are other calls, not mitigated officially by the Church, but by God's creative order. And so there is the call at home for the parent, child, spouse, or relative, to serve where there is need. And as God reigns over Church and society, there are calls in society, too. These callings, vocations, are how you can follow Jesus in your daily life. "How can I be faithful at work, or on vacation, Lord? Where would you have me go for the good of your people, or my family? How might I be a blessing? How might I make your kingdom known? How can I serve people or society?" These are great questions! And as for an answer: Well, what are you passionate about? Where do you feel the internal call to serve? And then, well, go to God's Word: the Lord may have something to say about it, follower. About your love life (we read that in our epistle lesson today, no?), about your habits, your heart, about your job - is it just about the most money? Or is there more to it, to his leading, to his Word his disciples abide in, which is the truth, and sets you free?

I commend those thoughts to you as well. "How might I serve where I am, and what is God's call for me?"

With that, then, let us finally explore a little bit of: As we follow Jesus, "Where are we going?"

Well, what might we learn from Philip and Nathanael and the 12? Was their path without struggle? Without trial? Without failure on their part? Without painful challenge? Church

tradition, again not the scriptures, but Church tradition states that Philip was crucified in Turkey, and Nathanael was flayed alive, that's right, skin taken off!

“And Jesus loved these men and was leading them for their good and the good of the world!?”

What a lousy job he did there. And we are signing up to follow the same guy, Jesus of Nazareth, who led them!?”

Yes. He, through the Word, through baptism, says the same to us, “Follow me.”

So who's going with Jesus? And who's letting their children go with him, and what if he leads them to a cross, like Philip?

What if he leads you, or your children, to cancer, to strife, to poverty, to brokenness, to persecution, to imprisonment, to an underground church, to loneliness, to death? You going along?

Many of us said we would when we stood up and took our confirmation or membership vows.

We said, like the Church around the world, “we would sooner die than fall away from Jesus.”

And yet when the hardship comes it's “how could you ever let this happen to me God, don't you love me?”

Did he not love Philip or Nathanael? He did. You know he did. He never asks his disciples to walk a road he hasn't. In fact, that would go against the definition of being a follower, he HAS to have gone before us for us to be able to follow. And so he has gone to torture, pain, despair, brokenness, betrayal, strife, and death. He's gone there. He knows that pain. He knows that darkness. And, God be praised, He's beat it. We can't, but he already has. And in doing so, he has shown his love for us, even if that means we, according to his plan, do die - even painfully.

To follow Jesus is to say, “wherever Jesus is, is better than anywhere else.” And the 12 faltered here, didn’t they? When Jesus went to the cross, they ran away. They didn’t want to be where Jesus was, because death was there too. And they were more scared of death than their “fear of the Lord.” And so they needed to find some other place to be – so they ran.

But they saw how wrong they were. Jesus is Risen, victorious over the grave. And that risen Lord came to them not to get even, but to forgive them, to send them out anew. And he forgives you too, by the way. And, having seen the risen Lord, they went out and even when faced with death they stayed true by God’s grace. Which means that even with death around, if Jesus is there, it’s still the best place to be. In fact, if death is around, you want nothing else than Jesus to be there. Because only he beats it.

And so they walked to crosses and knives. They walked those paths. But was their path without hope? Was it without forgiveness and grace? Was it without Jesus’ love and work? Not at all. (And neither is your path without these) And now, having finished their course, they rest with Jesus, where he is, and they have seen far greater things than a vision under a fig tree. So much more.

Let us follow Jesus. Where he is, is better than any other place no matter how exciting, how safe it might seem. And in our times of failure or doubt take comfort that his promises are not dependent on how well you followed, it’s dependent on his work, and he has called you by name, because he longs for his work to be yours. For free. Grasp it. Rejoice in it, it is stronger than death.

And when you doubt that, well, “come and see,” see the cross, see the empty tomb. And with his grace and courage rise up and let him lead you in his Word, which is truth that sets you free. And to follow Jesus, don’t believe me, believe him, you will see greater things than you can imagine.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.