

UNIVERSITY UMC OF REDLANDS, CA
“YOU WILL SEE GREATER THINGS”

John 1:43-51¹

January 14th, 2024 – Second Sunday after Epiphany

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.

⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

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

⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”

⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

⁵⁰ Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹ And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

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Introduction.

Beloved church, we have already begun 2024, and this year is full of challenges, of decisions to be made, but it is also full of opportunities to serve the Lord our God.

Next Sunday, January 21st, we will gather to get a glimpse together of what God has for each of us as His People and His family.

In preparation for Visioning Sunday, this text is very appropriate to motivate and challenge us to see our time with optimism and envision. So, I invite you to reflect on John 1:43-51.

The Holy Gospel for today, from John 1, takes place very early in Jesus' ministry, when he was first gathering his disciples. It's the story of Philip and Nathanael, how they came to be disciples and follow our Lord.

The story begins with Jesus finding Philip and saying to him, "Follow me." Notice that: Jesus finds Philip. Just like he finds us. He seeks us out, even when we were not looking for him.

Jesus calls us, even as he called Philip. "Follow me," Jesus says to each one of us: "Come on along! Find out what you will discover on this adventure of faith. Follow me, learn from me, as my disciples. Grow in your knowledge and faith."

Jesus calls us to keep on following him, in a lifelong journey of faith. He leads the way, every step of the way, and all the days of our life. How can you say no? He is speaking to you today.

So, Jesus finds Philip and calls him to follow. Now what does Philip do next? How does he respond? The first thing he does is to find Nathanael and tell him what happened.

Notice that: Jesus finds Philip, and then Philip finds Nathanael. And so it goes. Our Lord uses us as his instruments to invite others, so that they can hear Christ's call to faith and discipleship.

Today I want you to see yourself as a Philip. Jesus has found you and called you to follow him. That's wonderful! That's life-changing! That is the most important thing in your life. In fact, it is your life!

Jesus finding you and saving you and leading you day by day, all the way into eternal life—this is what life is all about. And what's more, this new life doesn't stop with you.

Your changed life, your verbal witness, your faith evident in your life—this becomes a witness to others. You too will be a Philip, “filled up” with the joy and excitement that comes from knowing the Lord.

Excitedly, Philip tells Nathanael, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote.” In other words, Philip is telling his fellow Jew, Nathanael, “We have found the Messiah.”

The Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One—the promised deliverer prophesied in the Scriptures, the one who will fulfill all the promises God made to our fathers: Guess what, Nathanael? We have found him! We've met him! The Messiah has come!

From Philip's perspective, this was a great discovery, and in his excitement, he expresses it the best way he knows how: “We have found him, the Messiah.”

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Then Philip identifies this Messiah by name, “Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” But notice Nathanael's response: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

You likewise may encounter objections when you start to tell someone about Jesus. You may meet resistance when you tell others that you have found Jesus and his gifts present here at University UMC of Redlands.

People may say: “University UMC? Where's that? Never heard of it.” Or “Methodist? What's that? No thanks. I don't believe in organized

religion.” See, these are the modern version of “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Be prepared for that, but then be pleasantly persistent. Notice Philip’s reply to the problem that Nathanael has with Nazareth. He simply says, “Come and see.”

That’s it. Just short and sweet, “Come and see.” Philip doesn’t engage Nathanael in a prolonged argument about the merits of Nazareth. He doesn’t get sidetracked. He’s just pleasantly persistent, inviting Nathanael to find out for himself. “Come and see.”

Now of course, there are many things about our congregation we can talk about, positive things, the various aspects of our life together: the camaraderie and the fellowship, the friendliness of our members, the potlucks and the friendships we enjoy.

Those are all good. And we should talk about them. But ultimately, above all, when we talk about our church, we want to talk about the one who is the very heart and center of our church, the church’s whole reason for existence. And that’s Jesus. We want to point people to Jesus.

The Lord Jesus Christ is here in his church, where his gospel is preached, his word is taught, and his life-giving sacraments are administered. This is where people will meet Jesus, their Savior, the author of life and the giver of salvation.

So don’t be afraid or ashamed to invite your friends and neighbors, your family members—anyone who needs Jesus—invite them to “come and see.” Come and meet Jesus here at University UMC.

You will see greater things than these.

Well, Nathanael’s initial objection is overcome by Philip’s pleasant persistence and his clear invitation. Nathanael does come and he does see. In fact, Jesus sees Nathanael approaching and he says, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!”

Nathanael can tell that this Jesus somehow knows something about him, that he has divine insight. “How do you know me?” “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.”

This manifestation of divine knowledge sparks something in Nathanael. Jesus is quickening faith in his heart. Nathanael declares, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Nathanael confesses something here that was even more than he may have known at the time. Jesus is the very Son of God, come in the flesh. As the Son of God, he is the only one able to save us from our lost condition.

Jesus replies: “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.”

Jesus here is telling Nathanael that he will see the divine power and blessing of God displayed in Jesus’ ministry time and time again. Not just that Jesus could see him under a fig tree. But that Jesus can heal the blind and the deaf, that he can cleanse lepers, that he can forgive sins that he can raise the dead. Those are the great things that Nathanael will see in Jesus’ ministry.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” In Christ, the kingdom of heaven comes down to earth. Heaven and earth meet in him.

And this business about the angels of God ascending and descending? This recalls the story of Jacob’s ladder. Remember that? Jacob had a dream about a ladder running between heaven and earth. “And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!”

And Jacob called that place Beth-El, the “house of God,” the gate of heaven. Well, that’s what happens now in Jesus. He opens up heaven for us. Jesus’ cross is our Jacob’s ladder.

By his death on the cross, Jesus bridges the gap between us and God. Christ came down from heaven, for us humans' and for our salvation. By his being lifted up on the cross, he raises us up from the depths of sin and death.

And by his resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven, he guarantees our own resurrection and eternal life in heaven. The cross of Christ is our Jacob's ladder.

Conclusion.

And so, the church then is our Bethel, the house of God where we find Christ, where heaven is opened to us. Heaven and earth meet here in God's house, because Christ is present here.

Yes, Jesus is here, present in our midst. He is here to open heaven for us. And at the same time, our Lord calls us to follow him in faith.

“Follow me,” he says to each one of us.

And so we follow, as he guides us out into the highways and byways of life, where we will find people for us to talk to—where we will find our own Nathanael's.

Yes, the Lord just may use our mouth to do the inviting!

That's how it went with Philip and Nathanael. Same thing today. Invite the folks you know—your friends and neighbors and your family members—invite them to come and see.

And when they come, what they will find here is Jesus giving out his gifts. “Can anything good come out of University UMC?” Oh, yes! Come and see. Go and tell.

Amen.