

The Road from Skeptic to Saint: From Information to Transformation

King of Glory Lutheran Church

Year B: 2 Epiphany: John 1:43-51

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<sup>43</sup>The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." <sup>44</sup>Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. <sup>45</sup>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." <sup>46</sup>Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." <sup>47</sup>When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" <sup>48</sup>Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." <sup>49</sup>Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" <sup>50</sup>Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." <sup>51</sup>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."

*Both Philip and Nathaneal had Epiphanies. Epiphanies are revelations of Christ. What is clear is that epiphanies of the Christ come to different people in such drastically different ways that it can even be incomprehensible.*

God's grace and peace to you!

On Monday of this three day weekend, we'll celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Listen to a story of Martin taken from his book, *Stride Toward Freedom*:

*I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.*

*The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.*

*At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at*

*your side forever." Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.<sup>1</sup> (Martin Luther King Jr, Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story, 1st edition (Harper & Brothers, 1958), 124–125.)*

We are in the season of Epiphany. Remember that Epiphany means revelation, or manifestation. Christ is revealed as divine, as God's Son.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was changed by this epiphany of God quietly speaking to him. It is often referred to as his "vision in the kitchen." God moves and speaks to God's people in mysterious ways.

Jesus said to Philip, "Follow me." And Philip did. No questions. No delay. Philip went. But then Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "Come and see the one we found – Jesus son of Joseph – we think he's the Messiah!"

Nathanael – bless his heart – replies something like this. "Oh you do really?! What good can come out of Nazareth?" (Sarcasm)

Or like this: (Shrugging shoulders with indifference) "What good can come out of Nazareth?"

Philip does his best. "Oh come on. Come and see!"

As Jesus and Nathanael are walking towards each other Jesus graciously bestows on Nathan a compliment without having ever met him. "Here is truly an honest, faithful Jew!"

Nathan – still in his doubt and perhaps with a tilt of his head replies, "How do you know who I am?" It's like he is saying, "You don't know anything about me. So don't start thinking you do! You better convince me."

Then all it took was one sentence. "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip found you."

That was all it took. Nathanael moves from information to transformation, from a presentation of facts to a revelation of the Divine. It's as if his head drops down to the middle of his chest and forever Nathan will not be the same man. God has revealed that this Jesus is God. There is an Epiphany!

He uses three important titles for Jesus. Rabbi. (Teacher/debater) Son of God. (Related to God) King of Israel. (One who will rule and be Lord.)

“I saw you under the fig tree.” For Nathanael, that moment was all it took to realize who Jesus was. One minute he was a skeptic and the next, a saint – a believer. A disciple following his rabbi, his God.

*Epiphanies of the Christ come to different people in such drastically different ways that it can even be incomprehensible.*

On a train ride from Calcutta to Darjeeling, Mother Teresa had an epiphany from God which led her to focus on starting the Missionaries of Charity in the Archdiocese of Calcutta. It is where she lived, prayed and worked for all the days of her life.

For many of us God epiphanies don't happen in a flash – they don't come in an instant. Neither are right or wrong.

For some of us it takes years to get from skeptic to disciple. We read, we question, we go to church, we listen for God. We try to learn from others who have travelled this road before us. We hear other people say, “God spoke to me and said...” inside we might be wondering how to hear this God that other people seem to hear with regularity.

When have you had an Epiphany moment? When have you experienced the living God and knew it without any doubt? Or have you? Neither is right or wrong. God works in slow ways and God works in an instant. Epiphanies come in different ways to different people. And there are plenty that are skeptical that church is even a place to experience God.

There used to be a popular term ‘cradle Lutherans.’ A cradle Lutheran was a baby born into this denomination we call Lutheran and who lived the rest of their life as a Lutheran. Are any of you are ‘cradle Lutherans’?

I ask the question, because cradle Lutherans are a fading group. They are dwindling, just like having a family farm for 100 years, or owning a family business across several generations. For a cradle Lutheran, perhaps – perhaps there weren't as many epiphanies. Church was what we did. Church was what we do. God was God – no need to question or search. Of course I'm using a broad brush. But I'm using it because we don't live in that age anymore.

Now we live in a time when truth is not as black and white. Right and wrong are not black and white. For plenty of people in their 20's and 30's, they approach church with doubt and skepticism, even indifference. Which can be why they don't come to church or they come, but their doubts are tangible.

In his book, You Lost Me. Why Young Christians are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith, David Kinnaman gives ideas to reclaim a generation. Ideas like: be honest, raise expectations, re-center on Jesus, invite participation, hand craft disciples, and discover people's giftedness.

It sounds good to me – but isn't that what we're all searching for when we come to worship and faith formation classes? Honesty. Expectations. Someone to help me learn how to do this thing called, being a 'disciple.' And a place to share our talents and abilities. I hope you are looking for those things.

Yet, here's the bottom line. Nathanael got to have his epiphany moment with Jesus because Philip invited him. Philip invited Nathanael to come and see. People need people. People want to be invited, included, and remembered. It starts with relationship. Jesus knew that. We are called to follow Philip's example.

Where are you on the road from skeptic to disciple saint? Are you feeling the joy and peace being with Jesus brings? Does your faith journey need a little boost? How about trying out Bible study? We all learn together. God can bring an epiphany in an instant and over a lifetime. So fight your indifference, have doubts, and be a skeptic once in a while. It's good for your soul, because chances are good that God will show up right about then. Amen