

John 1:35-51

Jesus has just acquired two new disciples and those new disciples then go to recruit others to the Jesus-movement. Sometimes we see a movie that wows us or read a book we want to tell others about. We want them to go see the movie or read the book for themselves so they may share the experience we had. This is what happens in John's Gospel.

One disciple after another encounters Jesus and has a transformative experience that leads him to tell others, so they too will "come and see" this man from Galilee and be changed by that experience. In John, the way the community of disciples grows is more like the "sleeper hit" whose box office success results from "word of mouth" than from a well-funded advertising blitz.

While standing with two of his own disciples, John the Baptist sees Jesus walk by and singles him out as "the Lamb of God". Because of John's testimony in the preceding verses that we read last week, the reader knows something about what this entails. But John's disciples, who were absent the previous day, do not. So they leave John and "follow" Jesus to find out for themselves who Jesus is.

True to the Fourth Gospel's preference for using simple language that works on two levels, to "follow" connotes more than a literal walking after Jesus. It functions as a technical term for discipleship and anticipates that their movement of leaving John to "follow" Jesus means they will cease being John's disciples and become disciples of Jesus. This "decrease" in the numbers of his own followers is a mark of

John's success as witness, which was John's primary purpose, and not of his failure as preacher.

Jesus asks these two disciples a deceptively simple question: "What are you looking for?" At one level, the question asks why they are walking after him. But fundamentally, this is the existential question asked of any potential disciple: What do you seek when you come to follow Jesus?

Their response also works on two levels. Apparently, they want to know where Jesus is staying because it is getting late in the day and they too need a place to stay. But since the Greek word translated as "stay" is a term that in Johannine vocabulary signifies a permanent remaining or abiding, their question essentially asks where Jesus permanently abides, reflecting the innate desire of any disciple to be in Jesus' presence always.

The two disciples do not know this yet, but ultimately the place where Jesus resides is with his disciples, as he says in the Farewell Discourse that he will be with them always. In the meantime, Jesus invites them to "come and see", an invitation that at one level means to go and look at where he is staying but at a deeper level is an invitation to approach Jesus with the openness to see him through the eyes of faith.

Spending time with Jesus transforms them, as seen in the change in titles they use to refer to him. At first they call him "rabbi," a title of respect. But when the disciple identified as Andrew speaks of Jesus, he refers to him by the more

significant title of “Messiah.”

This is one of only two places in the New Testament (the other is also in John) where the Hebrew word is transliterated in the Greek as *Messias* (so John includes a note that in Greek the term means *Christos*, the name and title of Jesus more familiar to John’s early Christian readers). Use of the Hebrew emphasizes that Andrew has come to see Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish messianic expectations.

And he was to tell others about this. Others must “come and see” what they have seen, so Andrew tells Peter and brings him to Jesus. Just as their experience of Jesus changes the first two disciples from mere followers to devotees, Peter’s experience with Jesus leads to a transformation of his identity, from Simon to Cephas/Peter, a name based on the word for “rock.”

John’s version of Peter’s name-change omits any indication that it has to do with Peter being the “rock” of the church, as is the case in Matthew. In the Synoptics it is Peter who identifies Jesus as the messiah, marking a crucial turning point in the relationship between Jesus and the disciples.

In John, both Peter’s name-change and the disciples’ identification of Jesus as messiah occur at the beginning of their time with Jesus, and it is not Peter but Andrew who calls Jesus messiah. In light of these differences, John’s conception of discipleship comes across as much less hierarchical. There is no one “rock” of the church among its members. Instead, discipleship entails a shared responsibility among the members of the community to bring others to Jesus and speak the truth

about him.

The pattern that occurs the next day is similar. Jesus speaks first to the potential disciple, Philip, whose response of accepting Jesus' invitation to "follow" him entails finding another potential disciple of Jesus, Nathaniel.

Nathaniel is sceptical, however. The difficulty for Nathaniel is less that someone who fulfills the messianic expectations set by the Jewish Scriptures has emerged than it is that this person is the "son of Joseph from Nazareth". Nathaniel asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Nazareth sat in the heart of Galilee, a region populated by Jews and Gentiles from several ethnicities. Positively, it could be said that it was a diverse region. The Jewish communities, at most, constituted about 60% of the Galilean populace. Jewish persons in Judea looked down on their kinsmen in Galilee. Judea was over 90% Jewish. Those in Judea paid the temple tax, kept the rituals more rigorously, and were less likely to intermarry. On the other hand, Galilean Jews were less likely to pay the temple tax, more lax in regard to ritualistic traditions, and more likely to intermarry. Their Judean cousins saw Galilean Jews as less pure, if not impure.

The problem was that social factors were immensely important in Roman society. For example, Roman citizens, wherever they might reside in the Empire, had status that non-Roman citizens did not have. One's ethnicity, nationality, hometown, family and education played a large role in determining one's social status and how one would be perceived and received. Social status was everything.

External factors were more important than internal ones.

Nothing is said in the Scriptures about the messiah's origins in the humble Galilean village of Nazareth. Bethlehem would be a more appropriate place for his origins, as the synoptic infancy narratives maintain. The Gospel of John says nothing of Jesus' ties to Bethlehem, because in the theology of the Fourth Gospel, that is John's gospel, neither Nazareth nor Bethlehem speaks to Jesus' true origins, which is with God in heaven.

Nathaniel seemed to approach life with a critical lens – a master of suspicion. His friend says, “we found the man about whom Moses and the prophets wrote!” Nathaniel doubts it, rationalizing that nothing good comes out of Nazareth. Jesus greets him generously as a man in whom there is no deceit. Nathaniel is suspicious, “Where did you get to know me?” Nathaniel is no Mr. Congeniality.

So when this guy, who tends to see the negative, effuses this overwhelmingly positive declaration of who Jesus is, after just meeting him, the readers' expectations are toppled. What is going on here?

The drama in this story counts on the fact that this character, Nathaniel, doesn't tend to act in this positive manner. He does not declare false positives, so if Nathaniel, of all people, confesses faith in Jesus, you can trust him. No, his faith has overcome suspicion about Jesus.

When they meet, Jesus lauds Nathaniel as “truly an Israelite in whom there

is no deceit” because Nathaniel had accepted the invitation to “come and see” without letting his own initial prejudice get in the way of seeking Jesus. This sets Nathaniel apart from other descendants of Jacob – the patriarch also named “Israel” who was famous for his deceitfulness – who deny the possibility of seeing Jesus as the Messiah because he does not meet their preconceived expectations of who the Messiah is supposed to be.

Nathaniel’s encounter with Jesus transforms him from sceptic to believer. While the reader of John’s Gospel knows that Jesus is not really the son of Joseph but the Son of God, Nathaniel’s experience of Jesus’ foreknowledge and piercing ability to know him convinces Nathaniel that Jesus is more than the son of a man from Nazareth, as Philip had told him. He has seen Jesus for himself, rather than take Philip’s word for it, and Jesus has wowed him.

Nathaniel is not one of those folks whose faith developed gradually. He is one who was also himself startled when the reality of Jesus snapped unexpectedly into focus. There is something about that fig tree remark that made clear for Nathaniel who Jesus is. The reader does not get to be privy to what exactly transformed Nathaniel’s view of Jesus. What is clear is that epiphanies of the Christ come to different people in such drastically different ways that it can even be incomprehensible.

By proclaiming Jesus “Son of God” and “King of Israel,” Nathaniel confesses that Jesus truly comes from God and is Son of God, not son of Joseph from

Nazareth, and that Jesus is the messianic king foretold by the Scriptures of Israel.

Jesus' response to Nathaniel's confession might read like a rebuke, but it is more like a trailer for more wondrous experiences ahead. Though the disciples have already had transformative experiences of Jesus, Jesus' glory will not be revealed to them until the wedding at Cana, and his most impressive feat – his resurrection – is yet to come. Jesus' predicts that his disciples will see God's angels ascending and descending, so John uses the image of Jacob's ladder to interpret Jesus as the Son of Man who serves as the link between heaven and earth.

To those of us who ask when we will have such an awesome experience of the divine in the world, the logic of today's reading provides a simple answer: "Come and see."

One of the disciples receiving this invitation is never named. He represents us, John's readers who, like the named disciples in this passage, are invited to see for ourselves how the divine may surprise us, transform us, and upend the prejudices and categories with which we expect to encounter God in the world.

The Christian faith is passed from person to person. That's how it started with Jesus, and that's how it's been for 2,000-plus years. What was it about Jesus that caused people to believe in him and follow him with no evidence? We don't know.

Without doubt there was something about Jesus that drew people to him. People meet Jesus, and they are changed. Whatever their deepest need was, Jesus

meets it. Then they tell others what happened. And that's how it has worked ever since. One person says to another, "I follow Jesus and invite you to do so too." Later on as the church grows, parents bring their infant children to Jesus in baptism and then bring them up to follow him. It's always person-to-person.

Follow the story throughout the New Testament. An Ethiopian eunuch is puzzled by a passage in the Old Testament, and Philip "proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus". Peter went to the household of the Roman centurion Cornelius and told them about Jesus, and "while Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word", which was the breakthrough of the Christian faith to the Gentile world.

The spread of the Christian church across the world is the person-to-person story of the thousands of people who fanned out across the globe to tell the story about Jesus and what Jesus had done for them. People become Christians because they have seen what the Christian faith has done for those whom they know. The saying passed down from the early years of the church still rings true: "See those Christians, how they love one another."

C.S. Lewis is a person whose account of his own conversion has brought some people to faith simply by reading about it. But that too was person-to-person, merely through the medium of the printed page.

Our task as Christians is not to "prove" the truth of the Christian faith, although many scholars have written persuasively of the truth of Christianity. Our task is not

even to persuade others to become Christian. Our task is to say, "Come and see." Philip could have given Nathaniel some of his own opinions. He could have said, "This Jesus knows a lot about the Bible." Or he might have said, "There is something about this man Jesus that draws me to him." Even when Nathaniel expressed skepticism about "anything good coming out of Nazareth", Philip might have listed some successful people from Nazareth.

But no: Philip simply said, "Come and see", as if to say, "You don't need me to advertise for Jesus; come and see for yourself." Nathaniel came and saw for himself.

That now becomes our task, to tell people, "Come and see." Come and see what Jesus has done and is doing for you!

Amen.