

John 1:43-51

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

Shortly after leaving her teaching job in Deer River, Karen wrote a book. One of the chapters had the title “No Offense, But...”. In that chapter, she went on to tell many stories of when students would start a sentence with those words. She also went on to say that whenever they did, whatever words followed were certainly offensive. Often times, the students would be trying to give a compliment, but it really just came across as criticism. Being a teacher, she was always getting criticized for something and compliments were sometimes disguised, such as , “I don’t know why other people don’t like you. I think you’re the best teacher in the school”. And, just as most humans would, she would focus too much on the negative. She could have 100 students say that she was the best teacher

they ever had (and yes, she heard that frequently) but then one student would say something negative and that was all she focussed on.

And, so it goes. Words can hurt.

When Philip found Nathaniel in today's gospel, he was excited to tell him that they had found Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth. Nathaniel replies, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Ouch! Those were not very nice words! Of course something good can come out of Nazareth! Good can come from anywhere, from anyone and from any situation, even if it isn't someone you know or something you are used to. This reaction shows just how closed minded Nathaniel was. And, he didn't originally think there was any value in this person just because he was different than expected. Just like all of us

who don't always see value in something that is different than what you expected.

Look at this past year. I have tried some new things. Things that were out of some of your comfort zones. Things that were different than the usual. Did that mean they were bad? Of course not. They were different, that is all. Just like a King or Saviour coming out of Nazareth. That was different, it wasn't bad. Imagine if nobody took Jesus seriously just because of where He was from! Imagine saying to Jesus, "No offense, but the last person I knew from Nazareth was a real jerk. I bet you are like that, too." Of course not!

Then why is it that humans are so resistant to change? And, better yet, why do some people feel that every thought that comes into their head needs to come out of their mouths? Of course Jesus wasn't offended by

Nathaniel's words. He was Jesus! He knew that people would question Him, have a hard time believing Him and chastise Him for the way He went about things. He knew change would be difficult and words could be dismissed. He could handle it - after all, He had God on His side!

But, not everyone has as thick of skin as Jesus!

Nathanael's skepticism with the question "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" is a reminder that sometimes we, too, may have preconceived notions that hinder us from recognizing the extraordinary work of God in unexpected places and people. The unexpected, the different, the new. No matter where Jesus was from, He brought goodness to the world. And today, no matter how we hear about Jesus, whether it be in a traditional church service, something new or something different, the words are the same. The spirit still shines through your discomfort. The words of God are still spoken.

Just think about the 12 people that Jesus chose to have as His disciples. In this gospel, He is starting to form His inner circle. He asked Philip to “follow Him”. He also asked Nathaniel to join Him, saying, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” These two men, along with the other 10 who were chosen were not what you may have expected. They were not wealthy or highly educated. They hadn’t done anything spectacular in their lives. They, in fact, were somewhat on the margins. If you took the disciples and brought them all together into one room, you would never in your wildest imagination guess by looking at them that this weak-looking pack of ordinary folks could change the world. But they did. The disciples changed the world because it was to them that the secret of the universe was first revealed.

That's why Jesus called them in the first place. If you're going to save the world, you've got to start somewhere. And if in the end you're going to save the world through humility, gentleness, compassion, and sacrifice, it makes sense to begin with a bunch of fellows who couldn't get much more humble if they tried! The messengers fit the message.

The disciples needed to be common, ordinary, and above all humble if they were going to do Jesus any good and so change the world. Still, Jesus did need them and that's why he called them. These ordinary men who did extraordinary things for God set the example for us. They formed the foundation of the Christian church, initiating a movement that steadily spread across the face of the earth. We are part of that movement today.

As we reflect on this passage, may we hear the invitation of Jesus in our own lives, saying, "Follow me." Like Philip, let's respond without hesitation. Like Nathanael, let's overcome skepticism and open our hearts to the extraordinary work of God. The journey of discipleship is an ongoing process of discovering and witnessing the greatness of our Lord. So, come and see, for in following Jesus, we witness heaven opened and experience the transformative power of being true disciples.

“Come and see” the love of God in Christ Jesus through baptism. Come and hear Jesus speaking to us through scripture, bible readings and music. Come and be blessed when you eat of the bread and drink of the wine.

We need to ask Jesus to open our eyes to surprising opportunities to see and hear His words. We need to ask Him to open our minds to be able to embrace new and

different. We need to be able to see and hear “The man from Nazareth” in any form in which His words can be found. Can God work out His salvation, grace, love and forgiveness in surprising, different and new ways? Yes, yes He can, and we are just a group of ordinary humans who are able to spread this message to others. But choose your words so that they are not hurtful to others. Don’t start any sentence with, “No offense, but…” And don’t disguise criticism as “helpful pointers”.

I obviously do not know how the name Bethel was chosen for this church. Maybe someone here knows the history. Regardless, I think the name is perfect. Bethel means “House of God”. As stated in an article I read, “Bethel is first mentioned in the bible in connection with Abram, who built an altar to God there. “From there Abram went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent and

there he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD”.

This was not the only Bethel. There was also a city originally named Luz, that was renamed Bethel by Jacob after he experienced a remarkable dream there. While traveling from Beersheeba to Haran to escape his brother Esau, Jacob stopped for the night in Luz. As he slept, he dreamed of a stairway or ladder that stretched up from earth to heaven. The angels of God were climbing up and down the ladder as God stood at the top - which, by the way, is what Jesus refers to in today's gospel when He was speaking to Nathaniel and said, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” The Lord spoke and revealed Himself to Jacob as the God of his fathers. When Jacob awoke, he declared, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the

gate of heaven”. Then Jacob set up a sacred pillar, named the place Bethel, and consecrated the site as a place to worship God.

So there it is. We sit in “the house of God”. We need to remember that when negativity starts to fill our minds. We need to learn to be open minded, keep some of our hurtful thoughts to ourselves and worship in any way that we see fit. It is the word of God that is spoken here, whether in reading, speaking or singing. Praise God! Let us pray:

Heavenly Father,

Let us not have initial reactions like Nataniel when something isn't what we expected. Let us be more like Nataniel was once Jesus told him He had seen him sitting under the fig tree. Let us heed the invitation to “come and see” and follow in the footsteps of the original twelve

disciples. Times will be tough, things will surprise us and disappoint us, but as long as we keep our minds open and our hearts pure, we will be able to share the good news of your Son, Jesus Christ, in any way you see fit. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.