

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – January 17, 2021 – Known
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18 and John 1:43-51

I am often struck by how incredibly compelling Jesus' presence must have been. How else can we explain the reality of him speaking no more than a sentence or two before thoughtful adults leave their old lives behind and follow him? In our second lesson this morning, Jesus has just been baptized by John in the wilderness of Judea. In dramatic fashion, he has received the gift of the Holy Spirit and heard affirming words from the heavens: "you are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."

Jesus, now officially commissioned to divine service, begins his public ministry in a familiar place, among the northern reaches of Palestine, in a region called Galilee. And there, in the land where he was born and raised, he approaches a fellow Jew named Philip, whom he presents with a divine summons in the form of a simple command, saying, "follow me."

In life, we all experience decisive moments. Occasions when we could go this way or that. Junctures at which we are beckoned by this influence or that interest. Crossroads at which we could choose to carry on in the same direction, or pursue a new and different path. Whenever these opportunities arise, we wrestle with familiar questions regarding the nature of our relationship with the gift of time. And how we

can effectively steward the financial resources in our care. And how, if we are each created in the image of God, we will choose to engage with others.

In our second lesson, Jesus' summons to "follow me" serves to commission Philip as a coworker in God's kingdom. At this critical juncture, the newly commissioned warmly welcomes the divine call. Philip's response is swift and enthusiastic as he hurries to meet his friend, Nathanael, and then eagerly shares the good news, saying, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth."

But, Philip's enthusiasm is quickly countered by the cynical musings of his respected confidant. Nathanael's tone is dismissive. He knows about this tiny village of Nazareth. And he does not hesitate to wonder aloud, in words that are raw and unfiltered, if anything good could possibly come from there.

We hear in Nathanael's response the familiar skepticism of the rational brain longing to see the evidence. And we empathize with Nathanael's recognition of how unlikely it is for God to so directly enter into one's own time and space. In short order, Nathanael lays the burden of proof squarely on Philip's shoulders.

People do this sometimes. They ask us to carry their burdens. And sometimes we do. But it is always a choice. Here Philip demonstrates considerable skill as a disciple. He knows that this is Nathanael's issue, not his. So he refuses to shoulder the proposed burden and, instead, extends an invitation to "come and see" for himself.

Friends, what are the barriers that hinder us from believing the good news of Jesus Christ? I know that you could likely name several of your own. But let me name a few. How many of us struggle with trust issues? Having been wounded by past disappointments, we are afraid to hope again. And, in an effort to protect ourselves from further hurt or disappointment, we seek to discredit either the message or the messenger. This is what Nathanael was doing.

Others among us question whether God has both the interest and the ability to make our lives a priority. We wonder if our lives matter. We ask if grace truly flows as freely as scripture teaches, or if we have become ensnared in some grand delusion. And some of us simply can't bear to live with the implications of God's expectations on our lives. We take every opportunity to hide and squirm from God's presence, as if we could actually remove ourselves from God's sphere of influence. This, of course, is the real delusion.

Our first lesson this morning comes from Psalm 139. Here we learn that “before we were, God was. God precedes all things, every step, every breath. God indeed is the one in whom we live, move, and have our being.”¹ In short, “there is no place so far, so desolate, so isolated, so ordinary that God cannot be in it.”²

God goes where God is needed, into the midst of confusion and despair, undeterred by human indecision and doubt. While it is true that Jesus and Nathanael have never met, when Jesus observes Nathanael beneath a fig tree, it soon becomes clear that Jesus knows him completely. There is no need for Jesus to dwell on the slight regarding his hometown. He simply begins with a compliment, saying, “here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”

Have you ever been known completely? The closest thing that most of us can imagine is a marriage, cultivated over decades of shared hopes and intentions. But in the presence of Jesus, Nathanael senses that he is known completely by God in Christ. His decisive moment has arrived. And suddenly, in the presence of Jesus, Nathanael’s doubts melt away. As he has been fully known, he longs to grow in faith

¹ John W. Wurster, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 1*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 189.

² Wurster, 188.

with the one who will shepherd the people of Israel. Greater things await, even if such knowledge is so high that he cannot attain it.

What greater things await in your life in this new year that we fear will look far too much like the last? What are your hopes and dreams? What are your growing edges? And how is God refining you for something more? Friends, we know only in part, but God knows completely. God knows us completely. Our thoughts, and our intentions, and our abilities. And it just may be that God, that great potter, is molding and shaping us now, just as God intends, for a moment such as this. That we, too, might step forward in faith, recognizing the beauty of God's call upon our lives. So that when that divine commission arrives, we will say "Here I am, send me. Let it be just as you have said."

Friends, let us embrace this journey of faith, in all of its complexity, remembering that while we do not know the future, God does. And let us be confident that God's will is just, and good, and merciful, and kind, and that we are blessed to be a part of it. May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.