

Jan. 17, 2021 Epiphany 2B
John 1:43-51
Just Follow Me, That's All—Part 1

How did your relationship with Jesus get to where it is today? This week and next, as we look at the calling of the first disciples, that is a great question for us to be asking ourselves. How did your relationship with Jesus start? How has it grown? Would you describe it as an event? A process? I really like the word "adventure" to describe our growing relationship with Jesus.

Years ago I came across a classic story called "The Little Prince" (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, 1943). The narrator is a pilot who crash lands his plane in the middle of the Sahara Desert. Miles from civilization, the pilot assumes he will only last as long as his water supply, but one morning he is awakened by a funny little voice that says, "Draw me a sheep." When he turns and sees an extraordinary little prince, he stares at him in disbelief. The pilot asks the boy where he came from, but the prince just says, "Please...draw me a sheep."

The pilot complies, or at least he tries to, but the first sheep he draws looks "too sickly." The prince asks for another. The second sheep has horns, so the prince specifies that he wants a sheep, not a ram. The pilot draws a third sheep, but that one looks too old. Finally, perhaps in some frustration, the pilot draws a box with three holes in the side and says, "The sheep you want is inside."

To his surprise, the prince says, "That's just the kind I wanted!" And this first, strange encounter with the little prince is one of many in a journey that takes the pilot—and the reader—from contentment in the familiar to joy in an adventure.

I think there is an element of this in the way Jesus calls His disciples—or at least, in the way the Gospel writers present the calling of the disciples. There is no big lead-up. There is no game plan laid out. There is no gradual convincing. There is not a lot of information given. Just "follow me." That's all. Let the adventure begin.

Many of the disciples have notable and even strange first encounters with Jesus. Next week we will look at Peter, Andrew, James and John. Today is Nathanael. And none of the disciples have a stranger first encounter with

Jesus than Nathanael. Nathanael is minding his own business when Philip runs up screaming that he has found the one whom Moses and the prophets wrote about, "And he's from Nazareth of all places!"

"Nazareth?" Nathanael says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Philip simply invites him, "Come and see for yourself!"

So, Nathanael follows, and before he can shake hands with this stranger from the backwaters of first-century Palestine, Jesus exclaims, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"

While some people are masters of flattery, Jesus offers no shallow compliments here—he sees Nathanael and Nathanael knows it. "How do you know me?" Nathanael asks.

Jesus responds, "I saw you under the fig tree even before Philip told you about me."

To our surprise, Nathanael proclaims, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

In one moment, Nathanael moves from his narrow ideas and cynicism to embracing the joy that is possible in an adventure following Jesus. But what is it about this strange encounter that makes Nathanael change his tune so dramatically?

There was a common metaphor used for the religious institution of Jesus' time—that of the fig tree. Fig trees produce fruit right along with leaves, and in an occurrence found in Mark and Matthew, Jesus comes upon a fig tree chockablock full of leaves. He goes to pick some fruit and finds that there is none to be picked. Whatever pollination is necessary for fruit to be produced did not happen.

The same thing seemed to be true of the religious institution Jesus critiqued—all of the bells and whistles were there, but the fruits were not.

Jesus knew that Nathanael shared this perception of those religious institutions, and Jesus knew that Nathanael was familiar with the fig tree metaphor—one that was likely as common as referring to Washington, D.C. as "the swamp." Nathanael knew that the fig tree he was "under" needed some pruning, and in few words, Jesus seemed to promise help with such an endeavor.

Nathanael is blown away, but the excitement does not stop. Jesus asks Nathanael, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these...you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

What do you suppose that might look like? If you had to draw the scene of the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man, what might that look like? More than a fantastic image, Jesus' image alludes to Jacob—who was called "Israel" after his wrestling match with God (Genesis 28). Like the metaphor of the fig tree, Nathanael would have immediately understood the connection to Jacob, who is said to have dreamt of a ladder reaching to heaven with God at the top. On the ladder, there are angels ascending and descending between earth and heaven.

Knowing this story of Jacob, Nathanael would have understood Jesus to be saying that he would be the one to re-establish the joyful relationship between the people on earth and God in heaven. Jesus would not do away with anything but would fulfill everything. Jesus would make it so that no person or institution could ever get in the way of God doing what God is going to do to bring about total reconciliation throughout the world and all of the created universe.

The Church—the Body of Christ—is said to have been birthed at Pentecost. Some people claim that Easter is the birth of the Church, and many speak of Christmas as that beginning. We may also consider that the birth of the Church happens whenever someone responds to that curious invitation to "come and see" what God is up to in the world today.

As participants in a faith community, we too have opportunities to join God in what God is doing. Often those opportunities lead us down unfamiliar paths. Sometimes those opportunities require that we take a good, hard look at ourselves and correct our path. Sometimes we simply need to find our spirits nourished and our energies renewed. More often than not, we can find ourselves somewhere in a cycle that moves us from contentment in the familiar ways of our world into a whimsical curiosity, in an adventure that promises us joyful results.

Jesus invited Nathanael on a journey that would take him all around the region and eventually right up to Jerusalem to encounter the powers of the day. There was no hour-by-hour itinerary, but there was a promise of joy

and hope in helping to usher in a world that could be—God’s kingdom come.

Jesus does not offer us as much information about what following him will look like. Not unlike the Little Prince’s pilot depicting a sheep by drawing a box with holes in the side, Jesus promises us an adventure and a chance to imagine together what following Jesus might look like. We will define what turns our journeys take, but we can only do that once we accept that curious, strange invitation: “Just Follow Me—That’s All.”