

Coming to Faith

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January 14, 2018. Pastor Keith preaches on Jesus' followers Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael, and the organic way Christians come together and stay together in the faith.

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We continue to reflect on this, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

How any one of us comes to faith is an interesting experience and a process. For many of us, we came to it by growing into it. We may have been baptized as a child, grew up with it in our home, and in time came to understand it more and more through involvement with church education, church worship, conversation, and perhaps personal meditation and study. Or we may have come to faith as an older person, or as an older child, and found out about it having been invited to a church, or just hearing about it and coming, for one reason or another, to become an adult now in the faith. But for many of us, if not for most of us, it's an ongoing and involved process. Coming to faith, staying with faith, understanding our faith, and being in relationship with God is a dynamic thing. It's an ongoing process for all of us, for all of our lives.

In today's gospel reading we have a snippet of a story that gives us an idea of how many twists and turns that coming to and staying with faith can have. Jesus has just been baptized by John the Baptist as our lesson begins today. And as soon as he's baptized, Jesus decides to go to Galilee, it says. This may be because it was a safer place to be after John the Baptist was killed within a short distance of Jerusalem. It was smart for someone preaching against the establishment to get further away. And so that may have been one reason why Jesus went to Galilee, to get further away from the authorities. But it's also closer to his boyhood home. Maybe he wanted to go to the borderland, the north part where it borders Syria, to start his ministry and to be closer to home. We don't know exactly why he did it, but there are various reasons.

Often, for us, faith has these qualities too. That is, our Christian faith may be something that's an alternative and something that we need to be firm about. Jesus was firm because he said, I have to get away from Jerusalem so I can say what I need to say. Maybe we work in a workplace that isn't really friendly to religion or to Christianity. Or our neighborhood isn't friendly to people, to faith. Or maybe there are folks in our own family background who aren't so friendly to our faith anymore, either. And so keeping the faith, and being firm in the faith in times of challenge, can be who we are from our roots. But we need strength to keep that up. Just as Jesus needed to go to a place where he could be firm in his faith, we need too to find those resources in us so that we can meet the challenges around us.

After Jesus is baptized, two people follow him. One of them is named as Andrew, who we hear about in our reading. He tells his brother Peter about Jesus. They were both from a nearby town called Bethsaida. Philip was from the same town, and they call him too. And then Philip finds Nathanael and tells him to be with Jesus also. One tells another tells another tells another. This process of one calling another and another is a reminder of the way that it is with the people of Jesus. One reaches another. One tells another. One tells the best news they know and invites others to come and find out too. They were still learning much as they were just getting acquainted with Jesus, but they knew he was someone special. This kind of organic activity of a group is still the way Christians come together, stay together, and invite others to join with the group. Each of these people had a different personality. Each

of them came to faith from a different kind of direction. Yet by coming to Jesus together, they were edified by one another. They could share their thoughts. They could share their feelings. And they were encouraged to know that they were not alone. They could talk about their faith, and what they were thinking about Jesus and living out the faith, and they could share that with each other.

This picture of faith is how followers of Jesus like us still grow the faith and grow in the faith. We want to keep it dynamic. We invite others because we are so intrigued by Jesus and because we know how the faith has helped us, and put our lives and our thought and our passions together. We want others to know about this too. So we begin to tell others and share with others how our faith is with us. We share with others because we each have a different perspective. We're all different from one another. We each appreciate Jesus in a slightly different way. We kind of look at this jewel we could call Jesus, this piece of this precious thing that God has given us, and we see it from our perspective. But how we see it might be a little different than how someone from another angle sees it. So we show our perspective with others and edify each other as they share their perspectives to us. We build up one another as we share with others and say things like, "This is the way I see Jesus. Come and see him too." Or we might say, "This is the way I see or hear Jesus. Tell me about how you see him in your life."

In this lesson today, we have four men talking together here as they approach Jesus. As with them, faith is shaped as we talk with one another about what this Jesus means to us. We talk informally, we talk in our study groups about what our faith means to us and how we live it out in our lives. Well when Philip approached Nathanael, Nathanael wasn't eager at all. Nazareth had a low reputation. So Nathanael resists the invitation at first. What good can come out of Nazareth? Why should I need to pay any attention to any person who comes out of Nazareth? In terms of reputation and power, Nazareth was about as different and far away in style and prestige as one could get from Jerusalem. The gospel writer of John though, is setting his story of truth and faith as far away from this traditional faith capital as he can get. Jesus is very different from the traditional religion, as it was practiced in Jerusalem. He tells a different truth and he tells a different way of life.

We find in our time that where we see and observe the faith being lived out is in the small places sometimes, and the out-of-the-way places. We don't see it so much where the power is and where the money is. We learn more about faith lived out as we observe those who have struggled, those who have survived hard times, and those who yearn for quality of life rather than fame and wealth. A faith that is sustained and witnessed and shown by those who have lived long, can be sustained in their faith and through their difficulty. And as we see these people who've lived out their faith through very difficult times, it shows us what having faith and what being in a relationship with Jesus is like. And as they share that with us, we understand how important it is.

Nathanael's name means "given by God" or "gift of God." After he changes his attitude and comes to believe in Jesus, Nathanael becomes a model of faith. He doesn't claim his faith is something he has a right to, or has a privilege to hold over others as those in authority did in those days. Nathanael receives his relationship with Jesus. He receives his faith as a gift. John is reminding us that when we come to Jesus, we come with our hands, our minds, and our hearts open to what God would have us believe -- not as ones who are telling God how he should speak to us. We want to be open to receive the gift from God. What turned Nathanael was that Jesus could pick him out of the crowd as someone he had seen under the tree. And even while Jesus says that that in itself isn't a very great thing compared to some other things Jesus could do it, it meant a lot to Nathanael. To pick him out from the crowd was amazing, but it also tells us how responsive Nathanael was. He was ready to let go of his previous prejudices about Nazareth. He was ready to be converted right away. When it came to hearing Jesus, when he came close to him, he could turn off all of his filters, put them away. But the words of Jesus

come to him.

That's a reminder to us that if we can clear away the things that get in the way, the more clearly the word of Jesus can come to us and we can hear him more easily. When we open ourselves and let ourselves receive what God wants us to have, and to know, and to believe, the easier it is. Ways of contemplation, ways of meditation can help us clear our hearts and clear our minds of all the clutter that gets in the way, so that the good word of Jesus can come to us. Then we can receive the gift that God wants to give us. It is interesting that Jesus noticed Nathanael under the tree. We can picture Nathanael there in nature, contemplating. It's about as far as you can get away from the hubbub of the temple in Jerusalem, in terms of environment. In this quiet place of nature is where Nathanael hears a call of Jesus, and Jesus becomes reality to him. And he comes to faith readily. This speaks again of the goodness of contemplation and quiet, where we can hear the call of Jesus and the word of God.

On this Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday weekend, I would like to read a short excerpt from Dr. Martin Luther King's book *Stride Toward Freedom*. It's about a time when his personal, quiet meditation changed him. He writes, "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 prayed, '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.' And 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."

Martin Luther King, Jr. was changed by this revelation, often referred to as his "vision in the kitchen." Nathanael's revelation, in which he suddenly could see clearly who Jesus was, changed him. He then immediately proclaimed Jesus as rabbi, Son of God, and king of Israel. The revelation to Nathanael allowed him something new to see. It snapped into focus for him, being in prayer and in contemplation under the tree. Thinking about God has the power to change our lives, too. When Jesus had come upon Nathanael, at first he said here's an Israelite in whom there is no deceit. In the Old Testament, remember it was Jacob whose name was changed by God to Israel. He was full of trickery and deceit until his name was changed. It was also Jacob or Israel who saw the angels of God ascending and descending from heaven in a dream. So now Jesus is telling Nathanael that he will see angels ascending and descending too, and that all of Israel will. This is a new creation of Israel. It had happened with Jacob. It had happened as his name had changed. He had this wonderful vision. Now it's happening again. Jesus and Nathanael, with the gathering of these people, is creating a new Israel, a new body of people to come before God. Nathanael represents the new believer, the new follower of Jesus, the new Israel. Far away from the power center in Jerusalem, a new kind of faith is springing up that looks to Jesus as its leader. It espouses a purity of heart before God, and finds truth in contemplation under a fig tree rather than in a corrupt religious center.

All of these dynamics that go on with this story are what go on with us too. There's the involvement of several, telling and inviting each other. There is a belief that there's no one right place where truth is found. There is private meditation. There's a call of Jesus that changes everything. The Epiphany, or showing forth of God, happens in many ways. We want to have our hearts and minds open so that we can receive God in Jesus, and have the eyes of faith to see the great things God does in our world, so

that we have the courage to bring God's goodness to the world. Amen.

And now may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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