

Season of Epiphany

The season of Epiphany, or Ordinary Time, in the Church calendar, is a time when we refocus on the beginnings of Jesus' ministry, and what it means to be followers of Him. We get to tag along behind, straining to hear over the din of our culture, stretching to catch a glimpse of Jesus. We may imagine ourselves walking with the disciples, and perhaps sitting on a grassy hill watching Him pray over loaves and fish – miraculously making a meal for a crowd that stretched as far as the eye could see. And, every time we listen and study and strain to understand, we see the message of Jesus in a clearer, more illumined way. That's what Epiphany, and this season is all about – the revelation of who Jesus Christ is.

We heard great encouragement from what some theologians consider to be King David's greatest Psalm earlier this morning. God knows us, our thoughts, all that we do, and He loves us anyways. David writes, "Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be," (Ps. 139:16), and "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting," (verses 23-24).

God shows His love to us most fully on Good Friday's cross – when Jesus Christ, God-with-us – took the nails for our sake. He proved His deep love for us there, and shows He's more than able to conquer any sin, and any problem we face, when He physically rose from the dead three days later. We recite the mystery of faith each month when we celebrate Holy Communion together: "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again." That's one of the fundamental, non-negotiable beliefs of the Church – that Christ – fully God and fully human, died for us, three days later physically rose from the dead, and will return again to judge the living and the dead.

This is a great mystery: How does God do the things which only God alone can do? I'm convinced that even the best scholars, theologians, and scientists haven't really got much of a clue of how God does the things which He does, and we'll all be surprised when we meet Jesus face-to-face! We've been talking about Jesus being somewhat of a mystery, especially in His early ministry. The mystery continues with today's Gospel lesson, from John 1:43-51. **Read John 1:43-51.**

Calling the First Disciples

If you go a few verses earlier in John's Gospel, you see that Jesus has already called a couple of His first disciples – Simon Peter and Andrew. Jesus has an important message for God's people, and ultimately the world, but the Carpenter from Nazareth

needs a little help in getting the message out. He needs folks who would like to come along with Him. People to try out for His team.

During my 5th grade year at Hardin, with Mrs. Willoughby and Mr. Borchers, my classmates and I thought we ruled the school. We were the biggest kids in the place, and all the other kids listened. Then, in late August, on the first day of 6th grade, my friends and I quickly learned that we no longer ruled the school. We were the smallest fish in a very large pond of students at Houston. As cool as we thought we were, there were social structures and unspoken rules we had to learn. We faced challenges of changing classes, finding the correct area of the cafeteria to sit in, and figuring out which older students were nice, and which were mean.

In a way, this is what's happening in the gospel lesson today. Jesus is making His way through Galilee, and has already convinced a handful of John the Baptist's disciples that they may want to come along and follow Him. Notice what Jesus says to Philip. He says, "Follow Me," (John 1:43). We're told that Philip, Andrew, and Peter are all from the same hometown. We may be able to assume that since they were all from the same place, and Peter and Andrew were already following Jesus, that being associated by friendship was good enough for Philip.

Philip and Nathanael (Bartholomew)

The hang up comes with trying to explain these guys' absolute willingness to drop everything for Someone – Jesus – who we presume they knew so little about at this point. What was it about Jesus that caused people to follow Him with little to no evidence? The next thing that John records is Philip's statement to Nathanael. "We have found the One Moses wrote about in the Law, and about Whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph," (verse 45). Again, we don't know – we aren't told – if there was a prior relationship between Philip, Nathanael, and Jesus. We don't even know if word had spread about Jesus, and they recognized His name.

I suspect He wasn't very well known yet, because notice the scrutinizing question – which is almost scornful – which Nathanael asks. "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" To which Philip replies, "Come and see!" (verse 46). Apparently Nathanael went and saw. According to Church tradition, Nathanael – who we usually refer to as Bartholomew – did missionary work in Asia Minor, started the Armenian Orthodox Church, and was martyred in India by being flayed with knives. That's something profound for us to consider this morning – most of the earliest followers of Jesus Christ were killed for their faith in Him.

John records, "When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, He said of him, 'Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit,'" (verse 47). Now this sounds like a nice complement to our modern-day ears. Nathanael's a skeptic. "How do You know me?" He asks, to which Jesus replies, "I saw you while you were under the fig tree before

Philip called you,” (verse 48). This is the point when Nathanael believed. “Nathanael declared, ‘Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel,’” (verse 49).

Messianic Misidentification

Because John the Baptist was preparing the way by preaching and baptizing, people were convinced that everything pointed to him being the Messiah. People in those days had a bad case of messianic misidentification. We’ve talked about this before. They wanted a warrior-king, who would throw off the shackles of Rome, and usher in a golden age for the Kingdom of Israel.

They were so convinced that John the Baptist was the Messiah, that they didn’t even recognize that the real Messiah was in their midst. Even after John corrected them, and told them that he was not the Messiah, Elijah, or a prophet – check out John 1:20-21 – there was still doubt that anything good could come from Nazareth. It wasn’t until John told his two disciples that Jesus was the One they were looking for that they went and followed. See, Jesus tells Nathanael in our reading today, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that. Truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man,” (John 1:50-51).

The last statement of Jesus in our text is noteworthy. “Truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man,” (John 1:51). The King James Version mistranslates it as “Jesus tells him,” referring to Nathanael. When you go back to the original Greek in which the New Testament was written, it’s a second person plural “you,” so it applies to more people than just Nathanael. Down south, in Kentucky and Tennessee, the folks have a way of saying that in a more understandable way for us – “all y’all.” That’s what Jesus is saying here at the end of the text. “All y’all’s going to see.”

David Copperfield

And Nathanael was as amazed as if he had just seen a great magic trick. All y’all’s probably seen a few magic tricks over the years. Back in the 1980’s, magician David Copperfield was on TV about once a year. He did all kinds of magic tricks. He sawed people in half on live TV – and they’d even wiggle their toes after they had been sawed in two. He made a passenger jet disappear. The following year, Copperfield made the Statue of Liberty disappear – in front of a live audience! He did some pretty cool stuff.

The reason I mention Copperfield is because there’s a lot of psychology behind the art of magic. The magician uses techniques of misdirection and cognitive illusion. They convince observers that they have discovered the solution to the trick. Once the observers are convinced, they’re less likely to pay attention to clues that pop up as to how the trick is really done, because they’re distracted with finding confirmation that their own theories or ideas are correct.

By creating cognitive illusions and directing our attention elsewhere, we're too distracted to notice obvious changes happening in front of us. Copperfield usually started his show with a run-of-the-mill parlor trick, like making a quarter disappear. It's a sleight of hand trick; I could do it when I was a kid. Copperfield would do this by passing the quarter from one hand to the other – and we assume that it's now in the other hand. When that hand is revealed to be empty, it's like the coin has vanished into thin air, when in fact, it's been slipped into a trick pocket on the cuff of his shirt sleeve, and never left the hand in which it started. Once we have one solution in mind, it's hard to consider – or even notice – alternatives.

Come and See

That's true of most things when dealing with our secular society today – and the secular way of dealing with things has seeped into the Church. We get an idea in our heads, and we're right, even when we're wrong. People generally don't have enough humility to admit when they're wrong. When they finally realize they were wrong, the topic is dropped, swept under the rug, and not discussed. It's a disappearing quarter trick – “Now you see it, now you don't.” That's something that's been generally the same about people since Adam and Eve disobeyed in the garden. What the serpent told them about the forbidden fruit sounded like a good idea to them. And here we are.

So it's only natural that people were disillusioned with who Jesus is. There are folks running around today who are disillusioned with who Jesus is. He don't fit their mold. They want a Jesus who glorifies America, rather than the Biblical Jesus, who glorifies God. Jesus was unlike anyone the people had encountered before. And if you know Him – if you've personally encountered Him – you know He's not like anyone else you've ever met! Like a good illusionist, Jesus is not forthcoming with evidence or clues that give away all of who He is, but just enough to strengthen our faith.

All Jesus does is invite them – and us – to come and see; to join Him on the journey. These magician-like techniques are not meant to be deceptive, rather, it's Jesus' way of shaking us up so that we're open to possibilities instead of being distracted by our own conclusions and assumptions. As Jesus tells Nathanael, “Do you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? All y'all are going to see greater things than these!” During this season of Epiphany, I hope we pause enough to “come and see” the great things Jesus is doing in our midst!

Prayer: By word and sign, O God, You identified Jesus, that we might know Him to be Your Beloved One, the vessel of Your goodness. By that same grace You have united us in Christ and called us Your people. How dimly we understand such love! Deepen our faith. Intensify our zeal. Unite the separated branches of Your church that we may bear an undivided witness before the world. Through Jesus Christ, in whom You are pleased to dwell. Amen.