**Sermon for January 14, 2024 John 1:43-51 “Seriously?”**

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

We find ourselves this morning in unfamiliar territory, outside of our usual bible neighborhoods. Matthew, Mark, Luke, we have some reference points there, and know a lot of those stories. But here in the gospel of John, things are different. Here we find the bold Jesus, the confident Jesus, the Jesus who does not invite but rather commands, “Follow me.” Instead of fishermen being invited by a lakeshore, we have townies responding to the persuasive words of John the Baptist, whose endorsement of this Jesus fellow could not be more positive. And so, when Jesus urges their coming with him to Galilee, they are ready for an adventure. And what an adventure they will get: miracles, healings, prophecies fulfilled, drama galore lies ahead. But right now, they are in Bethsaida, and on the way to Galilee on foot, which is not that different from being in Chico and heading for Mount Shasta on foot. It is all uphill from here!

In the passage we did not read this year, Jesus begins gathering his traveling companions the day before, when he recruits Andrew, who goes and corrals his big brother, Simon Peter. By morning Andrew’s friend Phillip has heard all about it, and when Jesus says you come too, he is ready…well, almost. He first has to find *his* buddy, the mysterious Nathaniel. And when he finds him, he makes it pretty enticing: *"We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth."* But Nathaniel is not so easily led. At the mention of Nazareth, he recoils, and harrumphs, “can anything good come out of Nazareth?” He makes a solid point: Nazareth is kind of the Barstow of the Holy Land. It evidently has always been a rough and tumble, cruddy kind of town, and it still is today, and so Nathaniel’s sentiments are spot on. I chalk it up to God’s great sense of humor – you know, like having the King of Creation born out in a barn, and then have this glorious personage-to-be hail from such a nowheresville kind of town as Nazareth. It bodes well for the Jesus who would embrace the *whole h*uman family, and have them embrace him in return; no silver spoon, privileged kid here, but a regular guy, raised as plainly and simply as can be. Phillip, credit to him, does not take Nathaniel’s bait, but simply invites, in the classic way the gospel of John is known for: come and see.

And Nathaniel, for reasons we will never know, does exactly that. He joins his friend Phillip and sets off to meet this Jesus.

Here is where the story gets a little odd; Jesus calls out to Nathaniel while they are still on the approach, identifying him as a ‘true Israelite in whom there is no deceit’. It is quite a contrast to Nathaniel’s estimation of Jesus just a few moments ago; he assumed the worst, based on Jesus being a Nazarene, but Jesus is full of compliments for him, which Nathaniel may or may not deserve. But evidently, he identifies with the description enough to be a little astonished that this rabbi, whom he has never met, knows him so well. How *do* you know me so well, he asks? We have never met, have we? And Jesus simply responds, I saw you under the fig tree before Phillip called you. That Jesus could know him on sight overwhelms Nathaniel entirely, and he falls to his knees and proclaims Jesus the Messiah, right out there in front of everybody. And unlike the other Gospels, where Jesus would have shushed him and urged that kind of talk to be private, Jesus just laughs. Seriously? Easily impressed, are we? Well, follow me, and you will have the adventure of a lifetime! You will see *far greater things* than these.

Over the last several years, you might remember that I sometimes go on and on about *dualism*, what we lightly call the ‘toggle switch’ kind of living. Dualistic worldviews presume a static, non-variable, this or that kind of world. I was not in favor of dualistic living last time I preached about it, and nothing has changed for me, but I wanted to talk a little about the middle ground for a minute, because to this day there are some Christians who are *just like* Nathaniel, too easily impressed. I suspect that these were the main folks flocking to tent meetings and revivals in days gone by, folks who are really kinda ready to believe anything. Then, there are the ones on the other end of human responsiveness – let’s call them the Thomases of our faith family. Remember Thomas? *Unless I* see *the nail marks in his hands and his feet, and put my hand into his torn and gaping ribcage, I will never believe!* These ones are not too easily impressed; they are most reluctant to be impressed at all! They are like the Norwegian we hear about in the old story, how it is cruel to tell him a joke on Thursday, because he might laugh right out loud during church! Believers who are all swirly mystery, and believers who allow no mystery at all both have a challenging time with Jesus’ legacy and teachings. But that middle ground – you know, where the United Methodists hang out – that is, I think, a reasonable place. We don’t want to be too easily impressed, but we don’t want to be the Great Stone Face either. We take things on a case-by-case basis, being accepting or dismissive as the situation dictates. Following Wesley’s advice, we weigh Scripture and tradition, reason and experience all.

I need to tell ya, there are points and details in this story that are too good to pass up without commentary. Did you happen to notice that of the four disciples recruited thus far, only two of them were invited by Jesus? The other two were invited *by their friends*, an excellent example of just how easy and effective evangelism can be if we lead with faith rather than with dogma. Neither Andrew nor Phillip did anything splashy, they just invited Peter and then Nathaniel to meet this Jesus, and his importance to them was so clear, so obvious in their enthusiasm, that the friends just *had to* come and see. That is, and always will be, the key ingredient of effective outreach; people need to see *our* enthusiasm, need to feel that this *life*, or this *church*, or this *Zoom event* we are inviting them to is important and meaningful to us. Cause they already know, just like those young men knew as they set off for Galilee, that the road of faith mostly trends uphill. But people will take an uphill walk if there is a vista, a rewarding part, good company along the trail, all sorts of things can get us to come and see. But lackluster believers, lukewarm inviters, tepid trail guides, they will not make that list. We cannot motivate others through nonchalance.

I say all of this to you on the Martin Luther King Jr. weekend, whose legacy and leadership we will celebrate next Sunday. Celebrations of the work of Rev. Dr. King always gravitate towards the same subjects: the road that leads to heaven is a road paved with acts of justice and mercy, and it is an uphill road. Dr. King knew, with intense pain and heartbreak, just how steep that road was. Yet he motivated thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions now, to join him on the voyage from inequality and oppression to equity and inclusion, and he did it the same way Andrew and Phillip did it, *invitationally*, leading with his enthusiasm, his confident faith, his sureness of cause. All who joined him knew the topography before they traveled. And all whom *we* invite, by word or example, to join us on the Way need to know that, too. It’s all uphill from here.

But here’s the thing; uphill climbing may be hard on the lungs, but downhill climbing is hard on the knees. Right? You breathe harder going uphill; ascension necessarily involves more air, more *spirit* being moved in and out of your lungs. Downhill walking is easy on your lungs, but punishes your joints and muscles; easy on the spirit, but hard on the legs. It is just a tiny leap of faith to move from the physical to the spiritual, and say that the upward way improves our spirit, while the downhill way just messes up our bodies. Wow, I feel a revival tent sermon coming on – the upward way improves our spirit, but the downhill way just messes everything up! St. Paul was always going on, wasn’t he, about how the ways of the spirit and the ways of the flesh are different, and I usually take issue with that kind of dualistic thinking, but today it kind of makes sense to me. The walk that fills us up with spirit is gonna be the uphill walk, every time. And the walk that leaves us sore and fatigued is gonna be the downhill walk, every time.

So, fellow travelers, we are forewarned. Going from Bethsaida to Galilee, going from Chico to Mt. Shasta, going from where we are to where we aspire to be, all of these are uphill from here. It will take effort, it will take stamina, it will take fortitude to hike together this way. But it is the only kind of travel that uplifts us, and fills us with spirit. Walking on the flat, or walking downhill, those paths lead to boredom and discomfort, every time. Walking together, even though it is uphill, makes the journey much, much better. And *way* better than ending up in Barstow. Amen.