

Epiphany 2-January 14, 2024

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

1 Samuel 3:1-10 and John 1:43-51

"I Found You...First" Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from his Son, Jesus Christ who has called you to follow him. Amen

You get a clue how being made a disciple works from the first words of the gospel reading for today. The first subject and verb of the first sentence give more than a clue. They make a promise. Jesus decided to go to Galilee. Jesus wasn't going to Galilee, an unlikely place to find disciples, because he had heard there were some good applicants for discipleship. He wasn't going there because the church leaders in that town had noticed some great qualities in a few individuals that they just knew Jesus was looking for. And Jesus did not decide to go to Galilee because a few people there had decided on their own that they would follow Jesus. Jesus decided to go to Galilee to choose and call people who would have NO CHOICE, but to follow him.

This week's readings for this second Sunday in Epiphany are more examples of what we heard about last week in the story of Creation of how our Lord God spoke into the darkness of Creation and said, "Let there be light" and it was so and when he spoke to Jesus when he was baptized he said, "This is my Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." and it was so. I commented last week how most Christians seem to accept the authority of the Lord to create life in other places with his voice, but when it comes to believing that the Lord can do the same in your life, we want or insist on having a little choice in the matter.

It is easy as Lutheran's to point our fingers at other Christian denominations as ones who declare that following Jesus is a personal decision rather than a divine calling that is simply given to you by God's word. However, the grip of wanting some control on how the Lord calls his disciples is not divided by a line drawn between denominations.

I am thankful that this is not currently a point of major opposition between Lutherans today. But the understanding that the Lord can know you in your mother's womb before you have a chance to speak a word was a point that has historically divided Lutherans too. I'll never forget when I was a teenager and we gathered at Willow Creek church one evening to say goodbye to one of my favorite pastors who had just accepted a new call. It should have been a night when this pastor and his wife could have relaxed and enjoyed the evening, but I'll never forget the embarrassment that I felt when my grandfather cornered this exiting pastor with one final theological question, and I was close enough to hear his question. Pastor, what is the truth about predestination? At that time, I didn't even know what the question meant, and I wondered why this question was of such importance to my grandfather. I wondered why he waited until this night to ask this question that could be so divisive? But at that time, I didn't understand how significant and important this question was to my grandfather who had watched congregations and neighbors split worshiping together over the question "Did I choose God and decide to follow him, or Did God choose me, and I simply followed him as his word told me to do?".

This theological question that takes many twists in among denominations and within denominations has become an issue of our making. It never was an issue for the Lord whose word was authoritative on its own to create the world from the beginning or when it commands disciples to follow before you even know, including you and me.

In the first reading for today, even though Samuel was working and sleeping next to the ark of the covenant in the temple, he didn't know it was the Lord who was talking to him. Why would the Lord, who as we are told had been silent for many years, decide to speak to a young boy who hadn't asked to receive a call from the Lord. It wasn't until Eli finally caught on after hearing the Lord speak into the darkness of night and their hearts three times, that Samuel's ears heard that the Lord was specifically speaking to him and called him to be his disciple. The

Lord didn't ask Samuel for a job description to see if it would match the skill set, he was looking for. When Samuel finally responds, it isn't with his hands and feet, but Samuel responds with his ears. Samuel said to the Lord, "Speak for your servant is listening." Samuel was authored at that time and placed into service by simply hearing the voice of the Lord. Samuel was likely young enough that he could have asked the Lord to ask again when he was older. But when the Lord speaks, you give up control and it will be whenever the Lord chooses to speak to you.

In the gospel reading for today, we learn of more examples of how the voice of the Lord predestined Philip and Nathanael to be his disciples and how they wanted to claim some ownership in their callings. From the beginning of the reading, it is clear who does the finding when it comes to discipleship. The scripture clearly says that Jesus finds Philip and says, "Follow me." Jesus gives Philip the voice command that the Lord gave to the light. Jesus' call to discipleship was not an invitation to see if Philip would one day accept the call and carry it out. The Lord knew that he would call Philip and he knew that he would be his disciple even if he demonstrated some control like the next disciples to be called, Nathanael was about to attempt. Philip had already forgotten who did the finding, by telling Nathanael that they had found Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth. Nathanael certainly wouldn't be a good candidate for a job if his superior knew that he had just questioned his credentials by where he came from. Nathanael sounded as if he had rejected his call to follow since Jesus was from the lowly town of Nazareth and why would Jesus want Nathanael as a disciple knowing what he thought of him from the beginning.

Philip doesn't argue Nathanael into a meeting with Jesus. You can't argue anyone into believing. Philip simply says, "Come and see." But once again, it was Jesus who saw Nathanael coming toward him first. And Jesus speaks first by telling Nathanael why he has chosen him to be his disciple. Jesus knows that Nathanael is not easily swayed or deceived by the words of others. Jesus told Nathanael that he was an Israelite who was not easily deceived and that is a trait that serves all followers of Jesus well. Followers of Jesus know the difference between what some people say is the truth compared to what the voice of Jesus speaks as the only truth.

Nathanael wanted to know the place where Jesus got to know him. He may have wondered if it was from something that Philip may have said about him. But Nathanael had been predestined to be a disciple before Philip told Nathanael to come and see Jesus for himself. Nathanael was found by Jesus when he was simply sitting under the fig tree doing nothing at all. Nathanael had been destined to be a follower of Jesus before Nathanael had any idea that Jesus was the Messiah.

In this season of Epiphany, we are reminded of the ways that Jesus reveals himself to you and me. Last week, we heard from the beginning of the gospel of Mark of how Jesus reveals himself to us by calling us his children in the waters of baptism. Today's reading from the beginning of the gospel of John tells us that he reveals himself to us in a specific call from the Lord when and wherever he chooses. I do not want to leave you today wondering about the same question that was haunting my grandfather's conscience years ago. As always, we simply listen to what the Lord has spoken, and it will be so. The Lord knew you before you were born. He knows when you get up to get a cup of coffee and he knows when you sit down on the recliner and fall asleep. Jesus destined you to be his disciple before you knew that he was your savior. Jesus decided to make you his disciple by his choosing in the waters of baptism and in the Lord's supper and whenever and however he decides to speak to you. He has spoken to you again today, through a Facebook Livestream message. Who else would have decided to come looking for you in that way? Amen