

Sermon Text: John 1:43-51

Now, I did ask the acolyte to bring me some water, and I know some of you think, oh no, that means a long and dusty sermon, but no, I was just thirsty.

Tonight, at 5 o’clock, we do have the honor and the privilege and also the convenience of the District Job Function Workshop, so all of you, whether you’re on a new committee or are an old committee member and want to come and get some new ideas, tonight, 5 o’clock here, and we will have a nursery.

Now, my sermon title was supposed to be, and it’s my fault, I didn’t communicate it to Emmie, and I think I just told her, and I must not have said it very clearly, it’s supposed to be “You Ain’t Seen Nothing Yet.” “You Ain’t Seen Nothing Yet.” We’ll get to that in a moment.

My daughter has transferred to a new college. I’m going to have to meet her today, and take her some things she forgot, pretty much everything. I like the story about a young woman, who wanted to go to college. She was still in high school. Her heart sank when she read the questions on the application blank. One of the questions was, “Are you a leader?” You see, she was honest, and she was conscientious, and so she answered, “No.” She returned the application expecting the worst. To her surprise, she received a letter back from the college, and it said, “Dear Applicant, A study of our application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it’s imperative that they have at least one follower.”

Today’s Gospel tells how Jesus got His first followers, and it is filled with unexpected humor and cynicism and death. We’re in the Gospel of John now, and many of you went through the study we had back last year, and you’ll remember the great theological Gospel begins echoing Genesis, and it says, “In the beginning,” but it says, “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God, and the word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Soon after that, after making that huge point, without blinking, without apology that God became flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus Christ, soon after that, John the Baptist recognized Jesus, and he called out, “Behold the Lamb of God.” Now we finish that in our minds, “who takes away the sins of the world.” Andrew was with John the Baptist, apparently one of John the Baptist’s disciples, and he heard what John said about Jesus, He was the Lamb of God, and he turned right around, and he started following Jesus. The first thing that Andrew did was go and get Peter. Andrew was over brimming with excitement, and he burst out, “We have found the Messiah.” He ran, and he had Peter by the arm, and he drug him to Jesus, and Jesus changed Peter’s name. It was Cephus, and he changed it to Peter. He said, “Follow me.” So the band begins to grow, and Phillip, from their city, joins with them. It’s all so easy so far! Phillip went to get Nathaniel. Phillip, filled with excitement, burst the same message; “We have found Him of whom Moses and the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Here’s where the fast and easy disciple collecting stops dead in its tracks! Nathaniel was irritated and cynical, and he skipped his mind

right over the news of the Messiah being found to, in essence, the Messiah the one who was foretold by the prophets and Moses, he skipped over that. In essence, he said, “Big fat hairy deal! You said he was from Nazareth?” He focused on that. He said, “What good could possibly come from Nazareth?” He missed the point entirely. If you read it right, you will find a little bit of humor there, and I think you will find Jesus, with a smile on His face, saying, “Whoa! An Israelite indeed in whom there is no guile!” You know what guile is, deceitful, crafty talk, smooth talker, measuring your words to keep your options open. Nathaniel had none of that. He was no follower, and he was not easily impressed. He is told that the Messiah is found, and the first thing that comes out of his mouth is not carefully measured words, but regional prejudice, which he makes no effort to mask! Nazareth! Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Hodges. Abbeville. Saluda. We all have our opinions.

It kind of reminds me of my son’s attitude about Chapel Hill, NC, where UNC, Duke’s basketball rival, is based. I once told him, a few years back, “Dave, since Duke is out of the final four, I’m going to pull for the only ACC team left, UNC Chapel Hill.” He looked at me as if I’d lost my mind! He looked at me the way Nathaniel looked at Phillip. Dave said, “UNC! Dad, how could you pull for UNC?” To make it clear, he said, “Dad, look, if UNC played Satan, you’d pull for Satan.” Now, that’s the way he feels.

So Jesus had easy recruiting until he met Nathaniel. Crusty, cynical, regionally prejudiced Nathaniel, and when Nathaniel balked at following a Messiah from Nazareth, Jesus smiled a little and said, “At least you’re honest. You don’t mince words. An Israelite without guile, indeed!” So to convince Nathaniel, Jesus pulls a very minor miracle, and he mentions that, before they physically met, before Phillip spoke with Nathaniel, from an impossible distance, Jesus had somehow seen Nathaniel under a fig tree. Now, fig trees were traditionally places to sit and pray and study Scripture. You need to know that. Jesus was telling Nathaniel that he miraculously, distantly saw him in prayer, and that is all that it took. Nathaniel got over his prejudice about Nazareth, and he dropped his cynicism, and he said, “You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus smiled again, and he said, in my translation, “That! You’re impressed with that? You ain’t seen nothing yet!”

In John 1:51, He says, “You will see Heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the son of man.” Now, this is an important point, a connection. Jesus calls Nathaniel a true Israelite without guile. Remember, Israel means what? One who wrestles with God. Where did the name Israel come from? It was the new name that God gave Jacob, and Jacob, who did wrestle with God, received both a blessing and a lamp. It was Jacob who dreamt the dream of a ladder, a ladder connecting Heaven and Earth upon which angels, these messengers, were going up and down. That was Jacob’s dream, Jacob’s ladder. Jacob, who had his name changed to Israel for his honest struggling with God. Jesus was saying, “You are pretty easy to amaze Nathaniel. You really haven’t seen anything yet. The ladder, that ladder connecting Heaven and Earth in Jacob’s dream, that bridge between the sacred and the profane, that connection which

“You Ain’t Seen Nothing Yet”
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enables God’s word, God’s message to be clearly heard by humans, that ladder is me! They’ll be traveling upon the son of man. That message will come through the son of man. Yes, indeed come and see! There is much more to see than my being aware of your praying under a fig tree!”

Now that we have that picture complete, aren’t many of us like Nathaniel? See, you wondered when this was going to get personal. Don’t we desire to believe completely and to follow, but we’re filled with one prejudice after another, and having been made a fool of before, we are cynical, and we say, show me, and then I might follow. Prove it, and if you can’t, I’ll just stay and I’ll pray by myself under my favorite tree. We’re skeptics. We’ve been made fools of before, and we don’t like it, so show me.

I know telephone sales people have lied to us to the point that very few of us even take those calls anymore. Network shows or news shows used to be trusted by the nation, and now people believe they are biased, and they’ve turned to other news sources. Preachers were once highly trusted, and now scandal after scandal, even congregations of Christians will watch their preachers for years before they relax and say, okay, he seems all right or she seems sincere. Politicians have fallen in esteem even below preachers. You know, teachers in South Carolina years ago used to say, thank God for Mississippi! I don’t know if anybody understands what that means, but they used to. I guess preachers can now say thank God for politicians. We’re cynical.

I helped a homeless person last week, who gave our congregation kind of a back-handed compliment. He said about Main Street, “I know folks talk about y’all, but at least you will help people.” I didn’t ask!

Apparently though some folks ask, “Can anything good come from Main Street United Methodist Church?” Can anything good come from our MYF? Can anything good come from our ministry to Greenwood? Doubting Thomases and negative Nathaniels have been around since the dawn of time. Life experience sometimes makes us that way. We know in our gut that someone, something ought to be trustworthy, and we still look, but we look with caution, and we look with our armor built up. Out of all the times we’ve been tricked and we’ve been lied to, of course, we’ve conveniently forgot that we have lied to others, and we have taught them not to trust us. We want to trust someone. We want someone to look up to and to follow. We don’t mind being a follower if we can find a trustworthy leader. Nathaniel, the cynic, was transformed. He became a follower because Phillip invited him. Come and see! Come and taste! Come and try! There might be something to this Jesus! It turns out there was.

Now, let me ask you. What was it that Phillip saw in Christ that moved him to follow, that stirred him so to invite his friend, Nathaniel, come and see? What did Phillip see in Jesus of Nazareth? Do you know? Do you know? And more importantly, more personally, have you seen what Phillip saw that made him put himself on the line even to invite his cynical friend Nathaniel? Have you done that? There was Andrew, who followed Jesus and invited Peter, and then Phillip invited Nathaniel, and that was just the

beginning. Soon there were 70, all inviting, I have found someone to believe in, the Messiah, come and see for yourself! Hundreds were soon following, and by the end of the century, half a million. Today, even now, souls are being redeemed in South America and Africa at ten times the rate of North America and Europe. Even in China where Christianity still faces persecution, the church is exploding, but it is not exploding here. Why not? There are certainly cynical Nathaniels looking for someone to trust. The question is, are there Andrews and Phillips excited and inviting? They listened as Jesus spoke to people in a way that made them understand their lives better than they understood themselves. They had seen new life and hope come to others just as it had come to them. They became less and less afraid and timid about inviting. When you invite, be careful. Some people invite to church in such a way as to berate and put down. Don’t do that! Go ahead and accept as Phillip did honest cynicism, as in Nathaniel, and say come and see for yourself.

The world is, without a doubt, painting Christianity with a broad and ugly brush these days. Many media outlets seem to be working overtime to disparage belief in God and to make unfashionable Christian faith, as something for the simple-minded and the unenlightened. They portray clergy almost universally negative. When you begin to notice this, and it is there to notice, you wonder how hard it will be in the near future to invite new people, who have had their minds prejudiced, not just against the town, but also against our faith, our faith. It will be more and more difficult to get people to come and see, and we cannot depend, as we once did, upon a lazy sort of blanket invitation. Starting now and in the future, we will have to have a faith that is excited and convincing to others, and be bold enough to share and invite those who want what they have seen in us.

Phillip did not preach. He did not berate. He just invited Nathaniel, and they told Nathaniel to go ahead and bring his honest doubts and to just come and see. There’s a lesson for us in that. There is a God, and that God has come to us in Jesus Christ. This we proclaim. Jesus is the link between Heaven and Earth. This we proclaim. In Jesus’ death and resurrection, sin and death have been burst open, and that connection is permanently open for God’s children to come to Him. I like what is says in Revelations 21:3 about the new reality, “Behold the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away. He who sat upon the throne says Behold, I make all things new.” This is our promise.

I know that every Christian believes that God can give us new life and eternal hope and redeem souls and give peace, which nothing and no one else can take away. I know you believe that, that you have tasted that hope, that you have felt glimpses of that peace, and you’ve claimed those second chances of forgiveness and been redeemed by God. Honestly ask yourself, why can’t I be more like Phillip? Can I overcome cultural bias against sharing my faith as Phillip did? Can I go to my friends who are seeking and cynical, and simply say, come and see? When they ask, can anything good be happening

at Main Street United Methodist Church, say come and see. Invite them to come and see. Evangelism is not hard. Invitation is not hard. It is our job. We offer new birth, new hope, forgiveness, and peace. We can invite people to come and see. Ask someone to the Bible study. In a few weeks, we begin an Acts study, which will be, I think, fascinating for people who have never studied Acts. Invite them to Sunday school. We have many different flavors of Sunday school for adults and for children. Invite them to the worship service and some church activity. If they’re cynical, that’s okay. The worst that can happen is they see nothing and they hear nothing and they have their cynicism confirmed. The best that can happen is a soul is redeemed and cleansed and given joy and purpose and peace, here and in eternity, so ask.

Now, as I close, I know those are beautiful words, as I close, you are gonna groan so loud, but this story is so good, I must tell it. I heard a story of two robins sitting in a tree. The first one said, “I’m really hungry.” The second one said, “Me, too. Let’s fly down and find some lunch.” As it happened, they saw some freshly plowed ground that had turned up just oodles of worms, and they ate and they ate and they ate until they could eat no more. One said, “I am so full I don’t think I can fly back up to the tree.” The other one said, “Me either. Let’s just lie right here and bask in the warm sun.” “Okay,” said the first robin. They plopped down, and they were basking in the sun, and no sooner had they fallen asleep than a big, fat cat sneaked up and gobbled them up! As he sat there washing his face after his meal, he thought, “I love basking robins.” I have a point. Will we be people who have fed our souls full of the good things of God and then sit back and bask? That might be a dangerous thing to do. It is such a small thing to go one step further, to fill ourselves and to invite others to come find what we have found, a small and vitally important thing. Fulfill the great commission to go and make disciples. You don’t have to make them, just invite them, and leave the rest up to God and God’s Holy Spirit. We have felt God here. Let us not keep it a secret.

Wouldn’t it be a wonderful thing if each one, at least once a month, invited another human to come and see, and wouldn’t it be wonderful if that come and see invitation became a weekly part, a natural part of our life and our relationships? I lied just a little. Now, I’m going to close with this. Nathan Williams told of two men who had been business partners for over 20 years. They met one Sunday morning in a restaurant. On the way out, one said, “Where are you going?” The other said, “I’m going to play golf.” The first kind of sheepishly said, “Well, I’m going to church.” The guy going to play golf said, “Why don’t you give up that church stuff?” The other man said, “What do you mean?” The golfer said, “Well, look, we’ve been partners for 20 years, and we have worked together, we’ve attended board meetings together, we’ve had lunch together, and in all these 20 years, you have never talked to me about going to church. You have never invited me to come to your church. Obviously, it doesn’t really mean that much to you.” Hunhh! The logic is irresistible. If Christ is the joy of our life and through Him we have new joy and peace and power and love for others and the ability to forgive and to make peace, then surely you should long in your soul to invite others to come and see. Amen.