

Figs and Faith

John 1:35-51

January 15, 2012

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter).

The next day 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 towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come 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.'

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Recently, I've been caught up in the election year hoopla.

As a political science major in college, I find it fascinating to learn how candidates for public office go about the process of campaigning for votes.

Last week, I was intrigued to see whether Jon Huntsman's gamble to ignore Iowa and get a head start in New Hampshire would pay off (not well, it turns out). I have watched Mitt Romney beat back the attacks of his rivals as he inches closer to becoming the presumptive Republican nominee. I find it interesting that the oldest candidate for president, Ron Paul, has the most support of the youngest demographic, 18-24 year olds. And I have been reading about the well-oiled Obama reelection machine that is using this Republican primary season to fine tune their get out the vote organization come the general this fall.

What each of these candidates desperately wants (and needs) to be elected is followers. And why people choose to follow certain leaders is an age-old conundrum that – at least for those interested in politics – makes for good drama every four years during a presidential election.

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A little over 2,000 years ago – this thing we call Christianity started because people began to follow a man named Jesus.

Sure – since then...for good and for ill...we have turned this political movement that Jesus started into what we now think of as "Church." In our time, we equate faithful discipleship with being a good church member. Nothing wrong with that. But the basic truth of the matter is that what Jesus came into the world to do was not found a new religion, but to save the world...and change the world...and love the world into the vision that God had for it to begin with. It was the most aggressive party platform in history: to bring in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus started a movement. And the movement has continued throughout the decades and the centuries because people like you and me have decided to follow Jesus...to be his disciples; to have God enlist our gifts and passions for the sake of Kingdom that Jesus inaugurated.

So my wonderment this morning is why? Why do we follow Jesus? For what reasons do we decide to be Jesus' disciple?

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In our scripture readings this morning, from the Old and the New Testaments, we have heard many different ways that people – ordinary people like you and me – found themselves on the journey of faith.

Knowing what I know about our congregation, I suspect that many of you are like me in that your “choice” to follow Jesus was kind of like Simon Peter’s. Simon Peter heard about Jesus through his brother Andrew. For Simon Peter, the choice to follow Jesus was based on the testimony of his family. That’s how I came to faith – through the leading of my family who were already followers of Jesus. I am a Christian because it is the way I was raised.

And that is a wonderful way to enter the pathway of discipleship.

But maybe you are more like Samuel in the story that Julie read from the Old Testament. Maybe, like Samuel, it took you a little longer to recognize your call to follow God. It took Samuel three tries – and the encouragement of a close-to-retirement pastor named Eli – to realize his purpose in being a disciple. Sometimes, that’s the way it is – it takes persistence and the wisdom of the aged to embrace the Christian faith.

And that is a wonderful way to enter the pathway of discipleship.

Perhaps you are lucky enough to have an experience like Philip. Philip has a direct, dramatic experience of Jesus. Jesus says “follow me.” Philip does. Bada-bing-bada-bing. It may sound rather radical to a bunch of cautious Presbyterians, but this kind of conversion happens all the time.

And it is a wonderful way to enter the pathway of discipleship.

And how about Nathaniel? Nathaniel’s call story is the focus of our reading from the gospel this morning. More and more, I think Nathaniel’s story reflects the way people in our culture, if they do, will come to the Christian faith.

A friend of mine calls Nathaniel the “patron saint of skeptics.”¹ Nathaniel heard about Jesus through his friend Philip – but rather than take what Philip had to say about this not-yet-proven, barely-known, rabble-rousing prophet from a backwater town with no reputation of greatness at face

¹ The Rev. Dr. Joseph John Clifford, that is.

value, he expressed some incredulity: “can anything good come out of Nazareth?” he asked.

“Come and see,” Philip said...

And so he did. That’s the thing about people like Nathaniel. They might be skeptical about the faith, but they are curious, too. Curious enough to show up and take a look around. Curious enough to see what this church thing is really about. Curious to know whether this Christian movement is authentic to its commitment to the Kingdom of God, or whether it is just a group of people in the routine of getting together on Sunday morning. People like Nathaniel are typically searching for something – but they are not easily convinced by the church’s pat answers about the faith.

When Nathaniel approaches Jesus, he is met by something he does not expect. Nathaniel thought that he was lost and searching for meaning – Jesus tells him that he is found and full of kingdom potential.

But how?

“Because I saw you under a fig tree before Philip called you.”

The first time I studied this passage, I thought...really? A fig tree? That’s all it takes?

Fig trees represent many things in the Bible. After they ate of the tree of good and evil, Adam and Eve used leaves of the fig tree to cover themselves because they were ashamed. Fig trees are a metaphor for the people of Israel, whom Jesus expects to bear fruit. In the prophecy of Micah, we hear that on that longed-for day when the Kingdom of God comes “all will sit under their own fig trees and no one will make them afraid.”

A preacher I know suggested that by bringing up a fig tree, perhaps what Jesus was saying to Nathaniel was this:

“I saw you under a fig tree – I know you and love you in spite of the places that you try to hide from the rest of the world;

I saw you under a fig tree – I know you are gifted. And I know what fruit you will bear for the world.

I saw you under a fig tree – I am the one you’ve been waiting for – longing for. I am with you now, so you don’t have to be afraid.”²

“I saw you under a fig tree,” Jesus said. And that is how Nathaniel came to faith.

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The makeup of the church and of this movement that Jesus started is comprised of people who arrive at the faith in different ways. In an age of skepticism and the increasing reality that we can no longer assume that people are born Christian or will practice the faith because it is the way they were raised, the church is going to have to make sure that we are a place that welcomes and makes room for all kinds of disciples.

I believe that we can be that kind of church. Indeed, I believe that we are.

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A friend of mine found his faith and his call to ministry through the welcome of a church with a willingness meet people where they were on their journey of discipleship. I will close this sermon with a story that my friend told about his experience, in his own words...

I did not grow up being very active in church. My father was Irish Catholic, and he left the church at 18. My mom was a Methodist. When we went to church, that’s where we went. We were better than Christmas and Easter Christians, but not by much.

That was part of the shock to me when I was approached about going into the ministry. I didn’t even go to Sunday school. How could I possibly pull off seminary? Can anything good come from a kid who was slack about going to church, whose parents divorced, who was a frat boy business major in college and now a commercial banker who couldn’t lend money to anyone who really needed it? Ministry? Me?

² With thanks to my sister, the Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin, associate pastor at Village Presbyterian Church, for this quote.

Those were my thoughts as I packed to go to Columbia Seminary. Then I uncovered an old Bible. It was genuine fake leather. A name was scrawled in gold in immaculate third grade penmanship across the front: "Joe John C." Inside it reads in brown magic marker, in my own handwriting, "Presented to Joe John Clifford by Rockville United Methodist Church, September 21, 1974."

It's the Bible I got the day mom and I happened to go to church, and they were presenting Bibles to the rising third grade Sunday school class.

"Will all the third graders please come forward," the nice woman said, and I went. She read the names engraved in gold on the covers of the Bibles as she handed them out down the line. She got to me and didn't know me from Adam's housecat. I wasn't on the Sunday school roll. But as a well-prepared director of Christian Education, she had extra Bibles in case there was someone like me. She asked me my name and announced it to the church. "This is Joe John Clifford, a child of God." The Bible had some gold foil in it that I could use for a do-it-yourself engraving.

As I packed for seminary that day, I heard somewhere in my soul, "I saw you under the fig tree before anyone asked you about ministry."

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Prayer: You call us from where we are, O God. And no matter our age or stage...no matter our questions or doubts...no matter our experience level with the faith...you bid us to follow. So help us along the pathway of discipleship. And help our church make a space for those who join us on the journey. Amen.