

## “The Fundamentals of Our Faith”

### John 1:43-51

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Our text today concludes the prologue to John’s gospel. John has introduced Jesus to his readers and now he begins the process of introducing some of the disciples. Andrew and Simon were the first two followed by Philip and Nathanael. This morning’s passage gives us the details of the selection of Philip and Nathanael.

“The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, ‘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.’ ‘Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?’ Nathanael asked. ‘Come and see,’ said Philip.

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false. ‘How do you know me?’ Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, ‘I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ Then Nathanael declared, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.’ Jesus said, ‘You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that.’ He then added, ‘I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man’ ” John 1:43-51.

We owe John a great debt of gratitude. I don’t know if he intended to do it, but in this passage he has shared with us three fundamentals of our faith. At first I did not see them, but the more I pondered this text, the clearer they became.

What are they? Our faith is experiential, relational and transformational. These three principles are the bedrock of our faith. Let me explain.

**Our faith is experiential.** It is based upon a personal encounter with Christ, which both Philip and Nathanael had.

“Follow me,” Jesus said to Philip along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. “Come and see,” Philip encouraged Nathanael when he asked if anything good could come out of Nazareth. “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked Jesus when the Lord paid him a high compliment.

I’m sure you noticed the highly personal nature of this text. Each character’s encounter with Christ was central to the story. No one followed Jesus without it.

At Smoke Rise, we consider ourselves to be evangelical Christians. To what does this refer? First and foremost, we believe that faith is built upon a personal encounter with Jesus. We don’t believe that an authentic faith can be borrowed or based upon someone else’s personal experience. Others can share their experience with us and lead us to Jesus, but it is up to us to experience him for ourselves and follow him.

The call to discipleship comes directly from Christ to every believer. It is a call from One who knows us and desires a relationship with us. It is personal and demands a response.

Reverend Cynthia Anderson, Associate Pastor of Barrington United Methodist Church in Barrington, Illinois, writes in *The Christian Century*, “What changes Nathanael’s life isn’t Philip’s persuasive description of Jesus; it’s not even Nathanael’s observation of Jesus. It is not what Nathanael sees about Jesus that changes things, but what Jesus sees about Nathanael. Being seen and known by Jesus turns this ordinary encounter into a life-changing experience that opens Nathanael to the light that’s come into the world to reveal heaven itself.”

“This,” according to Tom Ehrich, “is still how it works. There is no argument, logic or set of proofs that makes Jesus convincing. There is only the experience of coming to see and then staying to live.”

Authentic faith is born out of one’s own encounter with the living Christ. It is, first and foremost, experiential.

**Our faith is relational or communal.** It connects us to other people along our journey. Philip was compelled to go to his friend, Nathanael, and share his experience just as Andrew found his brother, Simon, and shared his. Keeping faith to ourselves is like trying to hold a balloon under water. It is impossible.

Our faith either leads us to a community of believers or encourages us to form one. It cannot survive alone. Even Jesus needed a support group, which led to the calling of the first disciples. He did not want to cultivate or practice his faith in a vacuum and I am not surprised. In his day, the synagogue was known as ‘the gathering place.’ It was the place where community was built.

No doubt this influenced Rabbi Harold Kushner, too. When asked the purpose of religion, he simply replied, “To build community.”

That’s what Andrew, Peter, Philip and Nathanael were doing. This was why Philip did not turn away from Nathanael and consider him hopeless after he sarcastically asked what good could come from Nazareth. Too much was at stake for Philip to be impatient or indifferent. Philip and Nathanael needed each other as well as Jesus.

I know of no one in my lifetime that understood the communal element of our faith better than Martin Luther King, Jr. From his sermon, “A Knock at Midnight,” he writes, “Through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood and yet we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood. But somehow, and in some way, we have got to do this. We must all learn to live together as brothers or perish as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God’s universe is made; this is the way it is structured.”

Where did Dr. King learn this? I believe he learned it from Jesus, Philip, Nathanael and a host of other disciples.

**Our faith is transformational.** It leads to changes in the way believers think and live. Nathanael was certainly changed, which was one of the reasons John told this story.

Nathanael went from being a hardened skeptic to becoming a devoted follower of Jesus that replaced his provincial snobbery and arrogance with genuine respect and humility. Under no circumstances could Nathanael have envisioned making such sweeping changes in his life until he encountered Christ and heard those irresistible words, “Follow Me.” That invitation and his response changed everything.

It can transform our lives, too. Listen to what Lisa Cornwell writes, “When we keep company with Jesus, he opens our minds to our neighbors and the world as well. Faith in Jesus makes it possible for us to think beyond our once closed minds. No longer do we live with old assumptions about what we can expect from God or the world. Instead, keeping company with this Nazarene opens our lives to all kinds of new possibilities about where faith will lead us and with whom we will keep company. Faith in Jesus as the Messiah means that good things can come from all kinds of unexpected places. It means that just when we think we’ve seen the best, we will see ‘greater things than these’ where Jesus is involved.”

Is your faith based upon a personal experience with the Lord? Do you have a support group with whom you cultivate and practice your faith? Is your faith making you a better family member and neighbor?

This is what Philip and Nathanael’s faith did for them when they followed Jesus. I am confident it can do the same for you. I pray you will respond to his personal invitation to you this morning and begin this faith journey with us.