

Epiphany 2B. January 17, 2021. John 1:43-51.

A few years ago, the church at large found itself mildly obsessed with people it called “seekers.” It wasn’t then and isn’t now clear whether these folks called themselves this, or whether they were actually even an identifiable group. I think that the idea was that there were many people who did not affiliate with a religious group and perhaps were even suspicious of organized religion, but still had an itch that consumerism just couldn’t scratch. And so, it was assumed, they were seeking . . . something, probably not even sure what that something was. Meaning, or community, or peace, or purpose for their lives, or beauty, or maybe even a god they could love, or they could believe loved them.

One of my mentors was a master at attracting and pastoring seekers. She could meet them where they were and walk with them in whatever direction they went. And she’d stick with them all along that path, whether it was heading towards something we would easily recognize as Christianity or not. I never quite had that skill—apparently it’s seen as abrupt when, in a first conversation, you comment that baptism is a rehearsal for martyrdom. But I have deep sympathy for anyone who is seeking something more, and maybe especially when they aren’t quite sure what that more is. I have been there, and occasionally still am.

This turbulent, bewildering world is reminding us all of our seeking skills. We are all seeking some peace, some safety, a break from the monotony, ways to be in community, hope. We are all seeking, in some form, salvation. Today’s gospel has good news, delivered with unusually good humor. The good news is this: Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip. The joke is this: in an audacious reversal of agency, Philip rushed to his friend Nathanael and said, “we have found the one we’ve been looking for.” Dude, we just read that Jesus found you.

The good news of the gospel is that in the midst of our desperate (or desultory) searching, Jesus finds us. The joke of the gospel is that we pretty much always go on to try to claim the credit for ourselves. We can be gentle with ourselves for this. We claim the credit when what we have been searching for finds us, because we really have been searching and working and trying. But the order of the gospel is always counter-intuitive: it is always, always, that salvation comes to us, and then calls us into work. We are saved and commissioned, but in that order. Jesus finds Philip. He doesn’t say good news, I’m here and all the problems will go away. He says, “follow me.” We are found and we are called to follow, and that alliterative pairing holds our salvation.

Jesus finds us, comes to us, bringing hope and salvation, and tells us to follow. This following will take these guys and us down long paths among surprising people, healing and feeding and speaking the truth. It will eventually take them and us to the cross and through it to Easter. But first, immediately, it sends Philip to go get his friend. Philip is not an expert evangelist. He bungles the story, mildly misrepresenting what actually happened. When his friend is skeptical, he doesn’t actually have any arguments to convince him. But he gives us a line that we can still use. When he doesn’t have any answers to Nathanael’s questions, he doesn’t try to make anything up. He just says, “come and see.” God comes to us and sets us to work, but that doesn’t mean that we’re going to be very good at the work. And thank God, we don’t have

to be. Because just as God comes to us, God will come to our friends. We're sent to bungle stories and fumble through answering questions, but we are not sent to save our friends. God does that. We get to offer invitations to come and see.

Philip finds Nathanael and invites him to come and be found by Jesus. Skeptical, Nathanael comes and is found by Jesus. Even though Nathanael is the one walking toward Jesus, before he can say a word Jesus sees him, knows him, and describes him to himself. I am inclined to think that Nathanael's exaggerated response to Jesus' revelation that he saw him sitting under a fig tree is because when Jesus describes him, he sees himself truly for the first time. God knows us better than we know ourselves, and it is in following Jesus that Christians come to know themselves truly. God finding us is the beginning of us coming to know and find ourselves.

My friends, I think that most of us, these days, are searching more ardently than usual for something. I know that I'm on about my fifteenth strategy for staying myself through the pandemic, and about my fortieth strategy if you can even call it that for living faithfully through injustice and civic unrest. The proximate things we're seeking matter in themselves, *and* underneath them is the longing for full salvation from the many things that oppress and hinder us and our neighbors. Our searching is normal and human and even good. But I want us to notice that Nathanael has been searching, too, for the same stuff we have. And his searching has led him to certain fixed views that in fact threaten his ability to greet God's coming salvation with joy. Because he knows that nothing good can come from Nazareth. Our searching can make it harder for us to realize when we have been found. Because however much we learn in our quest, God is still a god of surprises.

We are searching, yes of course. But as we do, let us also remember that God will find us, and that God comes always in surprising ways. We are to stay open, to notice when our surprising God finds us with hope and salvation, and then to go to our neighbors not to save them, but simply to say, "come and see." God will save the world. We are called to follow God in that work, joining in when we can. And when we aren't sure what else to do, to point, to invite, to trust. Amen.