

Epiphany 2B (1/14/2018)

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

**John 1:43-51**

*Why Jesus? Is it because of his supernatural abilities that we look to Jesus as Lord? Is it simply out of habit? Is it a function of culture? Or, is there something striking, something compelling about Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth that draws followers to him, then and now? Jesus encounters us, and somehow we are changed. He calls to us, so we follow. And with the eyes of faith, we are granted the privilege of seeing greater things – hope in hopelessness, new life in death.*

Why Jesus? Have you ever stopped to ask that question? Why do we gather every week to hear stories about a Jewish peasant who lived two thousand years ago in the Middle East? There are certainly other figures over the centuries from which we could choose – other teachers, other dreamers, other leaders of movements. There are others who deserve our attention, and who might earn our allegiance.

So, why Jesus?

Is it the signs and wonders? Does Jesus prove his superior status by changing water into wine, by calming the sea, or in the case of our Gospel from John today, by seeing someone – knowing someone – even before he meets them? The miraculous events recorded in the Gospels cannot be verified, but do they nevertheless constitute sufficient evidence to identify Jesus as Lord? Or, are miracles an obstacle to faith, a stumbling block to modern people who are reasonably suspicious of the supernatural?

Why Jesus?

Is it simply habit? Have we been Christian for so long that we're afraid of what it would mean to give it up now? Or, have we invested so much of our lives in Jesus' story that we can't bear to think of abandoning it? Even if it's foolish to call him Son of God and King of Israel, are we simply unwilling or unable to consider the alternative?

Why Jesus?

Is it a function of culture? Is it because Christianity is socially acceptable in the United States? Are Jesus' stories and symbols merely elements of the dominant religious tradition of which we happen to be a part?

Why Jesus?

Maybe you can't quite put your finger on it for yourself. **Maybe it's a mystery to you that despite your questions, your doubts, your frustrations – despite all that might drive you away – Jesus just calls to you.** If that's the case, you're a lot like Philip and Nathanael, the two disciples whose first encounter with Jesus is recorded in our Gospel from John today. For Philip, discipleship has nothing to do with evidence or certainty. Jesus doesn't have to prove his identity; his call to follow is all the convincing Philip needs. It's as though Jesus possesses an irresistible appeal, an authority that Philip can't help but convey to his friend, Nathanael: "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth."

Nathanael has yet to meet Jesus, so he's skeptical. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" he teases. I might respond similarly if a friend came to me and said, "We have found the promised one, the Messiah; he's from Graham." But Philip insists, inviting Nathanael to "come and see" for himself. And soon enough, Nathanael does see, witnessing with his own eyes that Jesus can know a person immediately and fully, and that he is sincere and worthy to be praised.

Maybe you've been fortunate enough to have met someone like that – a person who sees you for who you are and loves you right away, a person who quickly earns your trust and admiration. This is the effect that Jesus has on his first followers, that lacking any experience with him, they are nevertheless moved to venerate and follow him. **Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth seems to awaken faith in people simply by encountering them.**<sup>1</sup>

So, why Jesus? There is something striking, something compelling about Jesus that draws followers to him, then and now. His words resonate with intrinsic credibility, what Howard Thurman called "the sound of the genuine."<sup>2</sup> The Gospel of John holds him up as the true light, the embodiment of God's own grace and truth.<sup>3</sup> No wonder his first disciples followed him so readily. And no wonder we can't seem to let go of his story now. **Jesus encounters us, and somehow we are changed. He calls to us, and we follow.**

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<sup>1</sup> See Lee Barrett, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, 262.

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Valerie Bridgeman, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3556](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3556).

<sup>3</sup> John 1:9, 14.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, Lutheran pastor and writer, tells a story about her own sense of call. Stuck in traffic on her way to a seminary class one day, she glanced at the sky, and suddenly questioned the foundation of her faith: “With a universe this vast and unknowable, what are the odds that this story of Jesus is true?” she wondered. In that moment, it all seemed like nothing more than a fairy tale. “Except that throughout my life,” she reflects, “I’ve experienced it to be true.... I cannot pretend... that I have not throughout my life experienced the redeeming, destabilizing love of a surprising God.”<sup>4</sup> There is something fundamentally authentic about Jesus that persuades her to follow him, so like Philip and Nathanael, she does.

And, at the heart of the call to follow is a promise: “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree?” Jesus asks Nathanael. “You will see greater things than these.” Nathanael can only imagine what these greater things might be. But **we know the end of the story. We bear witness to a crucified Lord, the Son of God, the King of Israel who suffers in solidarity with a suffering world. We see him raised to new life to demonstrate that suffering and death do not have the final word. And so, with the eyes of faith, we get the privilege of seeing greater things – hope in hopelessness, new life in death – thanks be to God!**

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<sup>4</sup> *Pastrix* xvi.