

Second Sunday after the Epiphany; January 21, 2024
+ John 1:43-51 +
“God Calls through Christ”

The next day, Jesus wanted to leave for Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Peter.

Philip found Nathaniel 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.”

Nathanael said to him, “Nazareth! Can anything good from there?”

“Come and see!” Philip told him.

Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said about him, “Truly, here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”

Nathanael asked him, “How do you know me?”

Jesus answered, “Before Philip called you, while you were under the fig tree, I saw you.”

Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Jesus replied, “You believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that!” Then he added, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

Jacob was in big trouble. To make a long story short, he made his twin brother so angry that Jacob’s mother warned him: “Listen, your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you.” So Jacob ran away. When night fell, he fell asleep and had this dream: ...he saw a stairway set up on the earth with its top reaching to heaven. There were angels of God ascending and descending on it. There at the top stood the LORD... And then the Lord, as those angels walked up and down the ladder, spoke saving words to Jacob. He repeated his promise that Jacob’s descendants would become a great nation, and that they would inherit the Promised Land. He promised to keep Jacob safe and be with him everywhere he went for the rest of his life. And, biggest and best, the Lord repeated his promise to bless all the people of the world through Jacob’s descendants.

Two thousand years later, Jesus Christ wanted to get moving from the southern part of that Promised Land to the northern part, called Galilee. He was calling several of Jacob’s descendants, Israelites, to come with him. He called one named Philip. Philip ran to his brother Nathanael and told him that the Messiah had arrived. Nathanael was skeptical at first. Could God’s own Son come from a backwater like Nazareth? Philip invited him to come and see.

Jesus spoke to Nathanael: “Here is a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” And then Jesus gave Nathanael a sign that Jesus really was divine. He told Nathanael that he had seen him before he saw him. It may not strike us as Jesus’ most impressive sign, but omniscience is omniscience and only God has it. Nathanael knew that, so he said: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

And then Jesus said something that, to these Israelite descendants of Jacob, carriers of the Lord's salvation promise, struck with a whole world and eternity of meaning: **"Amen, Amen, I tell you: You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."**

The Lord called to Jacob with saving words from the top of a ladder that connected the Lord to him. It was a Bible story that a true Israelite like Nathanael certainly knew well. And Jesus now tells Nathanael: I the Son of God and Son of Man, am the ladder. I am the one who connects you to God's saving call.

When God speaks about the effects of sin in his Word, he uses many heartbreaking pictures. One is alienation, or separation. This is what sin does to our relationship with God. It drives us away from him. It always has, from the day Adam and Eve hid from him in the Garden after falling into sin. It not only alienates us from him for this life, but also for eternity. That is the best definition of hell: eternal separation from God.

But the Lord stands on the ladder of his Son Jesus Christ and calls down to sinners with saving words that reconnect us to him. His Son, Jesus, is the connection between the holy Lord and sinful people. Jesus' perfect righteousness covers our sin. His blood purifies us from it. His resurrection assures our sins are forgiven.

This was the restoration that God promised in the Garden, repeated to Jacob in his dream, and delivered in the saving work of Jesus Christ. Now God calls every sinner with saving words, inviting them to reconnect to him through the ladder of Jesus Christ. He is the one and only way, by his own divine declaration. There is no other channel for God's saving words, no one and nothing else to reconnect us. Only the Son of God and Son of Man.

Through the ages, God has been calling down with saving words in Christ. He called to Adam and Eve, to Jacob. He called to Samuel, as you heard earlier; he called the Thessalonians, as you also heard. And he has called you, too. For most of us he called in baptism, which connects us to God's salvation in Christ.

But God is so good and so loving. He does not call us just once and leave us to wonder if it was real, if his call still stands. He called Jacob at a time of doubt. He called Samuel three times in the temple, and many times after. He called Nathanael and the rest of his disciples again and again as they followed Jesus and listened to him teach about the kingdom of heaven, to which God was calling them through his Son.

In the same way, God does not stop calling us with saving words. This is a sign of true love: to care for a relationship so much that you maintain it by saying over and over again, "I love you." God never stops. With every proclamation of Jesus' saving work, with every baptism, and with every Supper where we receive Jesus' saving body and blood, God calls through his Son: "I love you. You are saved. You are mine." When Jesus spoke to Nathanael, he said, **"Amen, Amen..."** It is Jesus' way of saying, "There is no doubt about what I am about to tell you. This is set in eternal stone." And this is what God wants to say in faith about his saving call: "There is no doubt about my salvation. It is set that Jesus connects me to his Father, and to the heavenly kingdom." And so he graciously calls us again with his gospel: Amen, Amen.

Nathanael was going to see many amazing things over the next three years. Being told that he had been sitting on a fig tree would seem like nothing compared to seeing Jesus walk on water, feed five thousand with a few loaves and fish, and even raise the dead. But the greatest thing of all he would ever see was Jesus connecting him and all believers to God.

Think of all the things you see each day. Most are probably predictable, unremarkable. Once in a while we see things amazing and spectacular, special and memorable. But you will never see anything more amazing than what you see by faith: the Son of God connecting you to the Father and to heaven, restoring your connection with him with his salvation.

For now, it is a truth we see in our hearts. But with our own eyes we will see heaven opened and the face of God. We will climb the ladder of Jesus Christ to enter the kingdom of heaven and see God. That is the final result of God's saving call through Christ.

God's call changes more than our hearts. It changes our lives, too. Jacob was a different man after he saw the stairway. He was not perfect, but he lived a life more devoted to the glory of God. Samuel was a boy when God called him in the temple. The rest of his life was spent listening to and obeying everything God said to him. Nathanael heard the saving call and left his home, his job, his life to follow Jesus. In the end, he left safety and his physical life, dying for Jesus. And listen to how God's call was to change the lives of Thessalonians: **For this reason he also called you through our gospel so that you would obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold on to the teachings that were passed along to you, either by word of mouth or by a letter from us. May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and in his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and establish you in every good work and word.**

God's saving call brings the heart to faith, and brings the whole life to obedience. First you hear the saving call through Christ, then you keep listening. You keep listening over and over to that saving call, and you listen to everything God tells you. You hold on to it tight, and conform your whole life to his will. Jesus has reconnected you to the Father. You belong to him again, not to anyone else, not to your world, not even to yourself.

God's saving call in Christ is a simultaneous call to discipleship, to listen to God's commands and walk in them like your Savior. Christ is your ladder and your leader. You walk up him to the Father and the heavenly kingdom, and you walk behind him, in his footsteps. What was true for Jacob, Samuel, Nathanael and the Thessalonians is true for all who have heard and believed God's saving call in Christ: it changes your heart to faith, your ears to keep on listening to God's voice, your actions for every good work, your speech for every good word. Amen.