

35 The next day John was standing again with two of his disciples. 36 When he saw Jesus walking along he said, “Look! The Lamb of God!” 37 The two disciples heard what he said, and they followed Jesus.

38 When Jesus turned and saw them following, he asked, “What are you looking for?” They said, “Rabbi (which is translated Teacher), where are you staying?”

39 He replied, “Come and see.” So they went and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon.

40 One of the two disciples who heard what John said and followed Jesus was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. 41 He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Christ). 42 He led him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

43 The next day Jesus wanted to go into Galilee, and he found Philip. Jesus said to him, “Follow me.” 44 Philip was from Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Peter.

45 Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and the Prophets: Jesus, Joseph’s son, from Nazareth.”

46 Nathanael responded, “Can anything from Nazareth be good?”

Philip said, “Come and see.”

47 Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said about him, “Here is a genuine Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”

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

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

49 Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are God’s Son. You are the king of Israel.”

50 Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these! 51 I assure you that you will see heaven open and God’s angels going up to heaven and down to earth on the Human One.”

(Common English Bible)

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On our way to the airport on Friday we stopped at a cafe in Asheville, NC to meet up with a college friend we haven’t seen in person in decades. She is an elementary music teacher who clearly loves her students and the music to which she introduces them. She, like us, is greatly distressed by the state of our nation and world. She, like me, is reading Tangle regularly to seek to have some understanding of how those different from her think. She, unlike us, is not a person of faith, though she was respectful of our faith commitments. At one point I brought up some impatience with God on a personal matter. And she suggested that God has quite a bit on God’s plate at the moment, not that much seems to be happening with that either. Perhaps if the big picture were improved, I’d be more patient on the personal, I suggested. Her point may have been to call the whole existence of God into question. In any case,

this little exchange got me thinking about the many who don't believe, or struggle to believe, and the very legitimate questions they raise. Then, when we arrived in Portland late Friday night, a dear friend picked us up and as we drove home she shared about a lovely hand-written letter she received from a young person in her congregation, expressing great appreciation for my friend's ministry, but also her inability to believe in God and thus her choice not to attend worship. My friend has plans to hand-write her own reply sharing her own struggles with faith. I'll be curious to hear how this relationship unfolds.

There are a lot of factors that can breed skepticism, and challenge faith. I've been blissfully disconnected from news for the most part for the past week, but when I sat down to write this sermon yesterday I checked the news and was shocked by what has unfolded in Venezuela. I was heartbroken at the news about the ceasing of child care subsidies. I was discouraged by the persistence of war in Ukraine. And you know this isn't all that I found in the news. For the better part of the past decade, and certainly, at least the last five years, it just seems like circumstances continue to devolve. In addition to national and global calamity, many have been contending with personal calamity, devastating losses, diagnoses, brutal treatments, long suffering. Any of this can shake faith or even destroy it.

Now, I want to acknowledge that I, personally, had a deeply restful and restorative week between Christmas and New Years. We celebrated the remarkable life of my mother in law in a belated 80th birthday celebration. I cleared my sleep debt. We played games, took walks, and talked... all in a beautiful mountain lodge in the Carolinas. And before that I found great joy and comfort in our Christmas Eve service. Perhaps some or many of you are glowing from glorious holiday celebrations, connections with loved ones, rest, and/or recreation. Perhaps you are savoring the treats enjoyed in recent days or buoyed by the love shared.

All of this, I think, and more, is in the room right now.

I lay out the present emotional landscape, as I perceive it, because I'd like us to be mindful of the various states of hearts in the room and in the world at this moment as we consider today's Gospel reading.

If you were with us on Christmas Eve then you are more aware that the Gospel of John, our Gospel for the year, is quite different from the other three Gospels. Today's passage offers a good case in point. We have here John's representation of the "calling" of the first disciples. I put calling in scare quotes because in most cases Jesus doesn't seem to call at all, does he? This is starkly different from other Gospels who suggest Jesus calls to fishermen to drop their nets and follow him and they do. In John, the disciples who begin to follow Jesus do so for different reasons and in different ways. The first few did so on the recommendation of their original teacher John. They heard John identifying this Nazarene as the Lamb of God for a few days, and, eventually, started following Jesus for themselves. Jesus never called them. In fact, Jesus asks them what they are looking for, seemingly puzzled by their pursuit. I don't think they knew the answer to that question, so they come up with a mundane question, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" To which he replies "Come and see."

These two not only follow Jesus, but they invite others to do so as well. Andrew, one of the first two, invites his brother Simon, whom Jesus renames, to join them. One of the things that strikes me about this story is the number of different labels that are applied to Jesus. Lamb of God, Rabbi, and now Messiah. My goodness, what did they see or experience in one day with Jesus that they were sure he was the Messiah? But this is what Andrew proclaims to Simon that gets him to follow. Andrew leads Simon to Jesus. Again, Jesus doesn't call Simon. But he looks at him and renames him Cephas (aka Peter), both words meaning Rock, perhaps one could even say Rocky.

Now the next day Jesus sees Philip and does indeed call him to follow. And one of the first things that Philip does is to invite Nathanael to follow as well. He uses yet another description for Jesus "the one Moses wrote about in the Law and the Prophets: Jesus, Joseph's son, from Nazareth." Now, Moses didn't write the Prophets, and how much of the law he wrote is a matter of scholarly debate, but the point seems to be that Philip sees in Jesus the one foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures, the one his people have long awaited, and he knows him to be a concrete human being, from a family, and from a very real place in Galilee, Jesus, Joseph's son, from Nazareth. Philip has a most skeptical reaction to this invitation, "Can anything good

come out of Nazareth?" We recognize the provincial smear, often said by residents of one small town about residents of another, or students at one high school about those at another, or residents of one state about residents of another. And Philip echoes Jesus' invitation "Come and see." He doesn't try to convince him. He invites him to experience this for himself. Jesus offers Nathanael a high compliment, but still Nathanael is skeptical. Who are you? How do you know me? Jesus' answer is bizarre. "I saw you under the fig tree." And this conveyed some sort of knowledge about the one seen? Well, perhaps Jesus pays more careful attention than most of us, and perhaps much can be learned by just looking at a person. In any case, this exchange is enough to convince Nathanael, and to lead him to offer another identification of Jesus "God's Son, King of Israel." And Jesus then promises that much greater things than this will be seen.

All of these encounters unfolded in an oppressed part of the world at a particularly oppressed time in its history. And various factors made those first disciples open to following Jesus. Some were prepared by their discipleship of another teacher. Some responded to invitations from family. Some heard a direct call. Some responded skeptically to nudging from friends. I suspect in this room we have varied stories of how we came to faith, and, perhaps, some of us are still seeking faith. I wonder how many of us are inviting family and friends to join us in following Jesus, are extending the invitation to "Come and See" to skeptical neighbors, friends, family. As one of my first parishioners liked to say "You may be the only Bible your friends will ever read." We don't have to do any convincing. We just need to invite folks to "come and see." We may have different ways to describe Jesus, that's ok, the first disciples did too, but we can keep offering the invitations, in our oppressed world, in our oppressing time. Folks are hungry for community. Folks are desperate for hope. We have both. Let's share.

It may indeed be hard to believe in our time and place, or at any time and place really. But when we do, we can nurture this belief in others with God's help.

Source in addition to scripture that was cited in this sermon:  
I listened to the Bible Worm podcast before break and that likely influenced this sermon.