

Karen Hollis  
Sermon – John 1:43-51  
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O God our rock and redeemer. Amen

When we left Jesus last week, he had just come up from the water after his baptism in Mark's gospel. This year's lectionary readings jump from there over to John's gospel just for this one Sunday. John has great detail on these days after Jesus' baptism. In the other gospels he is immediately driven out into the desert, but in John, Jesus hangs out on the shores of the Jordan with John and his disciples for a while. Every time Jesus passes by, John points to him and leans over to the person he's speaking with and says, look, here is the Lamb of God. You see, in John's gospel, John the Baptist is given a heads up by God about who Jesus is: the one who comes after John will be known in baptism by the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove and remaining on him. It's John's job then to tell everyone! John sees it happen, recognizes it from God's description, and knows his job – that's him! The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – here he is! He is the one who comes after me because he was before me . . . he was before any of this, because he was in the beginning with God. Watch what he says and does, because he is literally God speaking.

Then one day, John the Baptist is standing with a couple of disciples and points out Jesus as he walks by, saying, Look, here is the Lamb of God. And the two disciples are like, “see ya!” and leave the conversation. Jesus turns, sees them and asks, “What are you looking for?” Good question. They go and stay with Jesus; on the way one of them recruits his brother. So we're

up to 3 disciples when this morning's text starts. First Jesus finds Philip and says "Follow me." Then, Philip finds his friend Nathanael and says, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote." Now these guys 5 guys don't know much about Jesus, but what they do know is extremely compelling: Lamb of God, Moses wrote about him . . . but Jesus' words, "Follow me," are probably the most important; here's why.

These were all good Jews Jesus was meeting. As good Jews, the men would have attended the local synagogue school at the age of 5 to learn Hebrew and memorize the Torah.<sup>1</sup> By the time of their bar mitzvahs, they would have been completely conversant with God's Word. Those who showed great promise were encouraged to continue their education. This would entail studying the wisdom and authoritative interpretation of the Torah by the sages known as "The Yoke of Torah." After that next multi-year phase, the young men, around 17 years old, who continued to show great promise were further encouraged to find a rabbi to follow. It was important to find the right rabbi for the student, because the purpose of the yeshiva experience or essentially seminary, was to make the student exactly like the teacher. The student's life would forever be bound to the teaching, so they had to seek a rabbi with care. The rabbis in turn looked critically on potential disciples. They tested not their knowledge, but what they were able to do with it, particularly what kind of questions they asked. When a student really showed promise and the teacher thought they would be successful at becoming like the teacher, they would say to the student, "Follow me." This

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<sup>1</sup> <http://preservingbibletimes.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Reflection.Follow-Me.pdf>

was the most affirming statement, the highest praise, the greatest honour for any Jewish man.<sup>2</sup> The teacher is saying, I believe in you.

Jesus finds Philip – he *finds* Philip – and says to him, “Follow me.” We don’t get to hear Philip’s actual reaction, but the next thing we do see is Philip on fire about this man who just called him to be a disciple. “Nathanael, we have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth . . . he told me to Follow him, he wants me to Follow him, Nathanael!” To which Nathanael responds, “can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Oh come on Nathanael . . . still, Nazareth was a small, secluded village, a surprising place for a noteworthy person to be from. Nathanael’s question pulls us out of the fantasy of the cosmic Christ, the Saviour of the world, and reminds us that Jesus is a person. He has a hometown. He’s a guy with a dad. He has a family and a history. Knowing just a few things about someone can sometimes block us from seeing who they really are. Maybe we have a judgment about where they went to school, people they associate with. Jesus is rejected later in Nazareth – those folks knew him as a teenager, perhaps that had something to do with it. In his humanity, Jesus prayerfully chooses to change the lives of the young men who come to follow him.

Of course, Jesus’ divinity comes through as clearly as his humanity, as Nathanael approaches in his scepticism. Jesus says, I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” How is that possible? He’s never met Jesus. And yet, Jesus knows him through and through, there are no inward parts

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<sup>2</sup> <http://preservingbibletimes.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Reflection.Follow-Me.pdf>

Jesus has not seen, and still says, “here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” He sees all that Nathanael is and still wants him to follow. None of us feel worthy, but Jesus sees promise and believes in us, in our ability to be like him.

Hearing Nathanael’s change in heart, Jesus knows exactly what’s going on and gets a little cheeky: “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree?” These guys have no idea what is ahead of them. “You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” That sounds amazing, a little obscure, romantic – trying to imagine what that would actually look like. But for Nathanael, it would have been very clear; Nathanael, a good Jew, who memorized the Torah before he was 13 years old, would have recognized Jesus’ reference to Genesis 28, where Jacob stops for the night, takes a rock for a pillow and God comes to him in a dream. He sees heaven open and angels ascending and descending on God, who tells Jacob he will raise a family in the land on which he lays, and his family will be blessed. Jacob wakes from the dream certain that the Lord is in this place; that he is in the house of the Lord.

Jesus describes himself here as God incarnate – the one on which angels ascend and descend – and further as a gateway to interact with the holy. Disciples can expect to be in prayer often, look and listen to Jesus to understand what God is about, draw on the resources and skills learned there to serve people in Jesus’ name. They can expect holy and mystical experiences to be normal as they become like their teacher.

But for most of us, these are not every day experiences – we can't control when we will experience, catch a glimpse of God, or experience healing – only God initiates these experiences – though in our prayer, we are still able to invoke the name of what Marcus Borg called the Post-Easter Jesus, the Christ, who continues to have power in this world, and ask him to be manifest with us. I worked for a Vineyard church for over a year while we were in Vancouver. I learned so much from them about how one modern denomination answers Jesus' call to follow by regularly calling on the name of Jesus to work in the world. The Vineyard is charismatic, meaning they collaborate with the movement of the Holy Spirit. Usually this looks like a time of healing after worship, where people gather around someone who has requested prayer, lay hands on them, and ask the Holy Spirit to heal the person in the name of Jesus. If the Holy Spirit acts, the people pray aloud and allow the Spirit to move through them in assistance. They practice healing based on what Jesus and the disciples do in the gospels and Acts, and people get healed; not everyone and not every time, but people are healed.

Gary Best, a Vineyard author tells the story of Jim, an acquaintance who reached out to him from the darkest place in Jim's life; he had a life story that was so intense, it was difficult for Gary to hear and believe, full of family dynamics and unimaginable circumstances. Jim was desperately in need of healing, as the coping mechanisms that he had relied on to do daily life had recently collapsed. After their first conversation, Gary was only able to offer him a short prayer over the phone, but was surprised when the man reported to him a few days later that his physical symptoms had largely be

alleviated. After some more phone conversations and prayer, the two got together and with Jim's permission, Gary told the man the story of God's grace in the Bible. As Gary went through the story of God's love for creation, Jim kept looking at him incredulously. "Are you sure this is true?" he asked. Yes, Gary said, "it really is." "Nobody I know knows this," he replied. Translation: you guys are doing a really good job of keeping this secret! Jim decided that day to offer himself to God and follow Jesus, so he and Gary sat and prayed together. It never goes how one plans – when Jim was sure nothing was happening, Gary assured him, "you know what? You took several years getting into this mess. It might take more than a half an hour to get out of it." Soon Jim sat in prayer, shaking and trembling for a good long while – the same kind of shaking has been identified in present day Israel as a way for the body to heal from trauma. And heal, his body did. A few days later Jim phoned Gary, exclaiming, "you didn't tell me it was going to be this good!! How can you not tell people about this?!"<sup>3</sup> I know. The answer to that question has so many layers, one of them being, our understanding of the fullness of God's power is limited. We're like Nathanael – we believe Jesus is who he says he is, but in our limited experience of these kinds of God encounters, we really have no idea what God is capable of. I spent over a year with the Vineyard congregation and I just skimmed the surface of understanding how to partner with the Holy Spirit.

On this Sunday – and next, actually – Jesus says I am with you, follow me. He shows us his humanity and his divinity. He will continue to show us

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<sup>3</sup> Gary Best, Naturally Supernatural, 27.

how to engage God's creation in ways we never imagined. Jesus says, I believe in you and if you follow me, I will show you the way. Thanks be to God!