

“Heaven is Open”

Jesus doesn't do anything haphazardly – He goes to Galilee for a reason. He “decides” to go there because He “desires” to find Philip. Finding him, He calls him to be His disciple, saying, “follow me.”

Being a disciple of Jesus doesn't just mean walking in His footsteps – it means following Him by faith. So, Philip goes and finds Nathanael – and in so doing – we have an epiphany, the “showing forth” of what Philip believes. “We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

Regardless of how Nathanael responds – even when he can't grasp how this son of a carpenter from Nazareth can be anything – Philip is not deterred, he knows what he believes – “Come and see,” he says.

Jesus has not just come to call Philip, but also Nathanael, to be His disciple. Before Philip even says a word to Nathanael – Jesus sees him and knows him. Notice, Nathanael doesn't find Jesus, he doesn't figure out who He is – Jesus finds him!

Not only does Jesus see and know Nathanael – He declares who Nathanael is – He gives Nathanael his identity. “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!”

We may look at Nathanael and think that he's not much of a disciple, that he blows Jesus off, that he doesn't care much for the things that come out of Nazareth – but Jesus says that he is a chosen child of God, one who is not deceived.

Again, another epiphany for us – we get to see what Jesus sees in Nathanael – we hear what's in Nathanael's heart by the confession of his lips. “Rabbi (teacher), you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

No guile, no deceit, no lies – just the God-honest truth. Jesus is his teacher – He is the Son of God – He is the King of Israel!

Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.”

Greater things than what? “Greater things” than seeing all that Moses and the prophets foretold, now standing right here, before his eyes? “Greater things” than the epiphany that Jesus saw him while he was sitting under the fig tree? Yes, “greater things.” “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

If that isn't familiar to you – that's the language of Genesis 28 and Jacob's dream in which he sees “a ladder set up on earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!”

Jacob declares that place to be “none other than the house of God ... the gate of heaven.” That's what Nathanael “will see.” Soon he will see Jesus change water into wine, heal people, feed the 5,000 and raise Lazarus from death to life. He will see Jesus put to death, and raised to life again.

Simply put, Nathanael will see, and believe, that Jesus is the “house of God” – for this is where God dwells on earth, in the flesh of this Son of the carpenter. Nathanael will see, and believe, that Jesus is the “gate of heaven” – that here, in the person and work of Jesus Christ – heaven and earth are one, “heaven is open.”

Folks, there is yet another epiphany for you. “Truly, truly,” Jesus says TO YOU – “YOU will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” Jesus isn't just talking to Nathanael – it's plural – He's talking to you, and to all believers – to the whole Church gathered to Jesus, “the house of God” and the “gate of heaven.”

Like Philip and Nathanael, the Lord desires that you would be saved. He desires that all would be saved – that through the Apostles and through His Church, all nations would be baptized, made to be His disciples – that they might see and believe that heaven is open to them in Christ Jesus.

Like Nathanael, Jesus sees and knows you. On the one hand, it's frightening to realize that Jesus knows what I did on Friday night – or, when I thought no one could see what I was doing. He knows all our sin. He sees right through the fig leaves we use to cover up our shamefulness.

But He also knows that the children of God do not deceive themselves – we do not deny our sin, but confess them – another epiphany – “making manifest” our sin before God and our fellow man.

As the children of God, we do not live in fear – frightened that Jesus sees us and that He will give us what we truly deserve --- we do not go about with our faces to the ground, ashamed of the things we confess --- we live as those who know and believe that Jesus is “the Son of God” and “the King of Israel.”

We invite our family and friends and neighbors to church – not because that’s just what Christians do, because its our routine, or because it makes us look holier than others --- no, we invite them to “come” into the very “house of God” and “see” the very “gate of heaven.” The Church proclaims to all that “heaven is open” in Christ Jesus.

The chancel in some churches have statutes or paintings of angels. The liturgy speaks of “angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.” These are reminders that here, where Christ’s Word and Sacraments go forth – the angels ascend and descend upon the Son of Man – that here stands the very “gate of heaven.”

The epiphany, however, comes through the Word of Christ Himself. His Word reveals what we cannot see – that He stands here in our midst. To the Apostles He sent out to preach His Word, He declared – “He who hears you, hears me.” To you and I He pronounces – “I baptize you ... I forgive you ... this is my Body ... my Blood ... given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.”

This is why God desires His children to come to church – so that we might be with Jesus – so that we might hear and see the “greater things” He does for us – so that we might receive His gifts in Word and Sacrament – so that we might believe and be saved.

As St. John writes towards the end of this Gospel: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.” Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.