

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

January 14, 2024 (2nd Sunday after Epiphany, Year B)
John 1:43-51

“Mom, come and see! Over here, come and see!” The little boy was pulling on his mom’s hand in the grocery store, to show her his latest discovery.

Another child I know, Anika, came running into the kitchen, “Mom, you gotta see this!” Anika’s mother immediately dropped what she was doing to witness what was so important: the cat was sleeping in the dog’s bed! Anika couldn’t believe it!

As adults we don’t get so excited as often, but there are SOME things. Monique rushed back on the trail to her waiting father, “Dad, the waterfall is amazing! Come and see!”

Her dad breathed deeply and chuckled, “Give me a minute. Let me catch my breath. I’m not as young as I used to be.”

Monique sat beside her father and waited patiently. Finally, he took her by the hand and nodded. She almost danced with joy and shouted, “Come on! Come and see!”

I remember when I saw each of my children start crawling for the first time, I thought my heart was going to explode. “Wendy, come here! He’s doing it! Look!”

Ever since we were children, we’ve invited others to celebrate with us the discoveries of life. Come and see! Come and see it WITH me!

In our story, Jesus invites Philip. Then, Philip invites Nathanael. They invite because they have a deep, burning desire to share good news with someone, someone they care about. In this case, the good news is the best news of all: Jesus himself.

When Jesus finds Philip, he simply invites him, saying, “Follow me.” He doesn’t intimidate him. He doesn’t launch into a long theological discourse. It’s a simple INVITATION: “Follow me.”

Philip’s response must have been a resounding “yes,” because he immediately goes to find Nathanael. And HIS invitation to Nathanael is ALSO a simple one: “Come and see.” (John 1:46) He isn’t deterred by Nathaniel’s negative response, because there’s no need to debate it. Just, come and see for yourself.

Some years ago, at a synod assembly I heard a startling statistic. It came from the vice-president of the ELCA at that time, Addie Butler. On average, a Lutheran invites someone to go to church with them once every 24 years. Listen to that again: Once every 24 YEARS, a Lutheran invites someone to go to church.

Actually, we at First may be skewing that average a bit because I’ve met several people over the last few years who came BECAUSE someone had invited them.

Still, I suspect that many of us can sit back under our own fig tree with Nathaniel and ask, “Can anything GOOD come from First Lutheran? Can anything good come from our Children, Youth and Family ministries? Can good come from ANYTHING we do? Maybe we need to open our eyes and take another look. Jesus already knows. He sees us under our fig tree.

Years ago, in my first parish in Western North Dakota, we hosted a rural plunge student from Wartburg Seminary. The idea of the rural plunge is to help a student from the city, with limited rural experience, by immersing them in rural life for a week, so they can get a feel for what rural ministry is like. They would stay with a farm family, and shadow the pastor for a week.

On their way out there on the train, their professor talked about this story. You see, there’s this misconception in seminary that being sent to North Dakota is like a punishment; like it’s the end of the earth. Serving out there, we pastors would say that it’s NOT the end of world, but we could SEE it from there. People say, “Can anything good come out of ministry in the rural church?” But with that program, North Dakota said, “Come and see.”

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." He reinterpreted the story of Jacob's ladder to mean that he HIMSELF is where heaven and earth meet. But their professor read that and told them that when they got to North Dakota and saw just how BIG their SKY is, then they would LITERALLY see where heaven and earth meet.

I think the same thing when I see the sun set over one of our lakes. The colors mirrored in the shimmering waters, that's God reaching down to remind us he's still around.

"Can anything good come from THIS church?" YES, I've SEEN it for MYSELF.

The Wednesday Coffeehouse kids said, "Pastor, come and see." And I SAW their energy and excitement about being VALUED in the church, and NEEDED, and their JOY in learning more about GOD. I stopped into the Senior High Youth meeting too, and some of those kids don't BELONG to this church, and some of them don't belong to ANY church, but their FRIENDS INVITED them to come and see. IN THEM, I came and saw—I saw JESUS.

The Food Shelf and Community Meals said, "Come and see." And I saw how treating someone with respect, like they're a child of God, someone who may have NEVER HEARD OR FELT that before, how CHRISTIAN LOVE can CHANGE that person's LIFE. IN THEM, I came and saw—I saw JESUS.

The men's Bible study said, "Come and see." And I saw their excitement about being with each other, their joy in growing in their faith, their comradery in sharing each other's joys and pains. IN THEM, I saw JESUS.

The Quilting group said, "Come and see!" So I spent some time with them, and saw their fellowship and the joy they took in creating something to help a person they'll never meet, half a world away. IN THEM, I saw JESUS.

I've seen you working in so MANY ways, MORE than I can NAME in this sermon. Sometimes even the simple things, like stopping and talking to someone in the store, or calling to check in on someone. Can anything good come out of First Lutheran? YOU say, "Come and see," and EVERYWHERE I LOOK in this church, I see JESUS.

That's what the church is about. The invitation is to come and see the LORD. NOT US, but what GOD is doing IN AND THROUGH us. Come and touch the waters of new life. Come and hear the words of good news. Come and taste the bread of life and the cup of mercy. WITH THESE THINGS CHRIST FINDS US, and CHANGES OUR LIVES.

The Lord is HERE, IN THIS PLACE. WE are GOD'S WITNESSES to that. But NO ONE will ever KNOW it if we don't TELL someone. IMAGINE what this place would LOOK like if EACH of us invited even ONE other person to come to church WITH us. There might even be someone in the front row!

What Jesus is DOING in this place is EXCITING, and people need to SEE it, because they need to see JESUS.

So go from here this week and INVITE someone: "Come and see. Come and see what GOD is DOING here." Amen.