

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany  
Church of the Holy Cross  
January 18, 2015  
The Rev. Elizabeth A.B. Tesi

John 1:43-51

I live across the street from the National Cathedral. This is actually the second time in my life I've lived near a major church. I'm talking major in terms of architecture and history. I'm a bit of church building geek—call it an occupational hazard. When I was in college, I spent my time abroad in Bath, England. My student flat was on North Parade, next to the river and a few streets away from the Bath Abbey. The Abbey was only one of several Anglican churches, but its architecture is truly major. It's called the "Lantern of the West" thanks to its high, clear glass windows, which bring incredible amounts of light into the interior—a welcome feature in the cold drizzly months of English winter. But its most striking feature is the front façade, which faces the square where the Pump Room is also located.

On that façade, there are a number of figures worn down by hundreds of years of weathering. Often, only the general shape remains of a figure—hands, feet, wings, and even heads have come crashing to the square below over the years to the point that now the Abbey has to have its façade checked regularly.

Wait, did I say wings? Yes, the figures had wings. In some cases, they are upside down and in some cases right side up and they are going up and down ladders built into the sides of the Abbey. They are angels, ascending and descending the ladders into heaven. The Abbey has Jacob's ladders built into the front façade, showing us that the Abbey's entrance is a place close to God.

Today, in Dunn Loring, we hear the Gospel in which Jesus begins to call the Disciples. He promises the faithful that they will see heaven opened and angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Our Gospel writer makes a radical declaration of God's love, available to all.

This might come as a surprise. John some times comes across as a very exclusionary

Gospel writer, and also as one who is quite esoteric. He draws abstract pictures. He is high theology: talking about God Godself without all that many of concrete ideas to anchor us. He is not the one who is going to proof-text the Old Testament to show us exactly how Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecies, but he is going to skillfully weave in references from the Hebrew scriptures, allowing strong readers to pick up on those references. The almost throw-away reference to angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man directly refers to Jacob's dream, when he lay in the wilderness near the city of Luz, and named the spot where he lay Bethel- the spot where heaven touched earth. By connecting Jesus to Jacob's ladders, John shows us that Jesus is the space where heaven touches earth in human form.

But it's okay if his readers didn't pick up on that: the reference to Jacob's ladder is more subtle. The stronger narrative of this reading is the calling of the first disciples. Jesus finds Philip near Bethsaida. Philip then takes the initiative to find Nathanael. Nathanael asks wryly "can ANYthing good come out of Nazareth?" To give you some context, many residents of the time felt that Nazareth is like that small town most of have in our background. I'm from Connecticut, so for me, it's Waterbury. My hometown (somewhat unkindly) used to call Waterbury "the armpit of Connecticut" and that should tell you all you need to know about Waterbury. That's Nazareth. It's a small, poor, insignificant town. Can anything good actually come out of there? Hmph. That's part of what makes this reading interesting. As the disciples are being called to go follow this one man in whom heaven touches earth, they are being called to follow this guy from Nowhere.

It's also interesting that Nathanael might not be an actual person. Some scholars suggest he is a composite- a collection of several of the followers of Jesus. Jesus actually had many more people following him than just the 12. Nathanael might be the composite of a few of the earliest followers. Nathanael is our everyman.

We might expect that God's blessings were available only to those select few disciples who dropped everything to follow Jesus on that simple invitation. Yet Nathanael is willing to believe once he meets Jesus. That should give us hope that God's love, contrary to our expectations, is available to everyone. I think that one of the elements that has driven people away from churches is this popular notion that you'd better believe exactly like us, reciting the exact words at exactly the right time, or else you will fall short in the judgment and lose the chance to have God's love. It's grace-filled to be told that is not so.

That is the grace of Nathanael recognizing that the angels of God are descending upon

Jesus, the person in whom heaven has touched earth. Nathan as a composite opens up this story to all of us. God is not a narrow character available only to those who choose to worship in a specific way, but because so many different types of people are meeting Jesus, God is reaching out through Jesus to find a multiplicity of ways in which to interact with humanity.

And this is good news that we want the world around us to hear. One of the interesting challenges and calls we get to respond to this year is to hear the new ways in which God is calling us to be God's people. And I'm not talking about the work you will do with a new Rector. Telling the Good News is not the work of the Rector alone. Your soon-to-be leader can only accomplish so much without the engagement of the people. You are actually the Church of the Holy Cross in Dunn Loring. Seeking to hear where God is calling this church... that falls to you.

One example, of course, is the feeding the homeless program, which we opted, after careful discussion, to discontinue this year. The amount of work that went into that program combined with the fact that just one or two people were most of the workforce (for a program that fed over 170 people a month), led us to believe that that program was not the way in which God's call was best realized. We do believe that there are hungry people in our community, and we do believe that we are called to reach out in love to feed the hungry, comfort the dying, soothe the suffering, and all in the name of Christ. But we also came to believe that we are called to do this in a different way. And we aren't sure yet how that can be done. How can we see this need- this literal hunger in the world- and respond to it out of the energy of the good news of God revealed to us? That's what we mean when we talk about a calling. That's what we mean when we say that you are the church- you'll be the ones who can dream up the energy for what might come next. Where are we being called?

God's love is freely available to all. We say as much in our welcome statement each week. Just like Philip who called his friends and the people who we now call Nathanael, we are still called today to follow the one in whom heaven and earth met. You are the ones who will build this church and follow Christ in your lives in faith. That is in fact good news, filled with hope.