

## **The Lord is Near The Second Sunday of Epiphany January 14. 18**

*Based on John 1:43-51, Psalm 139:1-16*

The day before our gospel story for today starts, Jesus has already begun gathering up people to become his disciples. The first one to follow Jesus is Andrew, and another disciple whom John doesn't name. And interestingly, these two are actually disciples of John the Baptist, who then follow Jesus after John tells them that Jesus is "the Lamb of God". Then Andrew after spending a day with Jesus, brings his brother Simon to Jesus, and Jesus obviously sees something in Simon and re-names him Cephas or Peter—the Rock.

So now, the next day after this, our story begins with Jesus deciding to go to Galilee. Jesus 'finds' Phillip, according to John, our gospel writer, so we can assume that he must have been looking for him! Phillip may well have been an acquaintance or a friend of Andrew and Simon as they were all from the same town. Jesus invites Phillip to join him as one of his followers. And Phillip, goes immediately to Jesus, no questions asked it seems. He very quickly comes to believe who Jesus is—the Messiah, God's anointed one, the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote. Phillip is excited about this meeting with Jesus, and wanting to share his new-found faith and knowledge, seeks out his friend Nathaniel. Ah, Nathaniel, he doesn't jump on this new Jesus bandwagon just on the say so of his friend, he's a little more skeptical—wanting more information, trying to be sensible and rational and has trouble believing that anything good can come out of Nazareth! Nazareth, that town's not big enough for anything as immense as the Messiah to come from! It would be like saying Jesus was from a village like, well Auburn or Walton! Nathaniel is open minded enough to accept his friend's offer, obviously intrigued and apparently trusts his Phillip's judgment sufficiently to go and check it out. So he goes along when Phillip says "Come and See".

And Jesus, being Jesus, instantly recognizes within Nathaniel his true nature, just like he did the day before with Simon Peter. Nathaniel is a man of integrity, he is a man of honesty and truthfulness and Jesus tells him so. The continuing skeptical Nathaniel questions Jesus, how do you know me, where have you seen me? Jesus says simply that he saw Nathaniel under the fig tree, before Phillip introduced them. Now what kind of an answer is that, truly? Just because he saw me under a fig tree? Nathaniel, perhaps in a flash of insight, or more likely in a flash of God given inspiration-- realizes, and understands what Phillip knew instinctively-- he is in the presence of the Son of God, the King of Israel --an awareness that must have been truly remarkable for Nathaniel. Talk about an Epiphany experience!

John the Baptist shared with Andrew his understanding that Jesus is the Messiah. And Andrew talked to Simon cum Peter. Phillip was called by Jesus, who follows immediately and then Peter shared the good news of the Messiah's presence with Nathaniel. Before all these men answered Jesus' call, they were prepared in advance by someone whom they trusted, who told them that the Lord was a very real presence. So when they heard Jesus' call, they were able to commit, and say "yes Lord".

Our gospel reading is a story about people being called by Jesus and responding to the call, and also how they wanted to share their understanding of God with others for whom they cared, wanting to share the joy of that knowledge of who Jesus was. What is the message for us in this story, for us here, today? Yes, we are called, each of us, to follow Christ, in faith. And not only does God call us, but calls us to share that, to bring those whom we care about to the knowledge of God's love for us. That's how we spread the good news, the joy of our faith, by sharing it with others. That is what we have come to call 'the Great Commission', what all Christians are commissioned by Jesus to do!

Jesus recognized within Simon the strength that would make him Peter, the 'Rock' on which the church would be built. Jesus knew that Nathaniel was a man of integrity—"an Israelite in whom there is no deceit" is how John said it. Jesus knew them from the inside out you could say! Jesus, God's son, our Lord knows us, knows us by name, knows who we really are. For it is God who forms us, searches and knows us, discerns our thoughts and is acquainted with all our ways, as the writer of today's psalm put it. God has incredibly intimate and personal knowledge of us. More than we know about ourselves! Our relationship with God is really a personal one. And when we actually spend some time and ponder it, think about all that God is, the immensity of that can truly be overwhelming for us mere humans to

understand. “How weighty to me are your thoughts O God!” (*Psalms 139. 17*) What I also find amazing, is that a God who is this immense, this powerful and vast, really wants to even be bothered with having a personal relationship with me. That is most humbling.

The psalmist too, is conveying his sense of incredulity in the vastness of God’s knowledge of each of us, who we are what we do. No matter what we do, God is there. Now, there are two ways that you can look at this. This psalm is sometimes titled *The Inescapable God*. The word inescapable is an interesting choice, not one that makes me feel comfortable. It’s like we can never get away from God, God’s always there watching over us, and we really want to flee from this brooding presence, yet can’t escape it either. This God is a scary God, a presence to be feared, to avoid, a God who needs to be placated, like a schoolmaster or heavy-handed parent or boss always looking over their shoulder at you. And some people do see God this way; I know I did for many years!

But you know; there is another way to read this psalm: turn it completely around, “do a 180”. Yes God’s presence is there, but not hemming us in; or fencing us in—it’s more like encircling us, surrounding us with love. It’s like, well, when you were a child, and you hid under the covers of your bed, and you felt that as long as you were under them you were safe. Remember that feeling? It’s like God’s encircling us in a safety zone! And even in our deepest darkness, God is there, because the dark isn’t dark for God, it’s our darkness, and God is light, God brings light to our darkness, like the light God brought to creation, it is good!

God does have an intimate knowledge of us, “God knit us together in our mother’s womb”—a beautiful visual image, so God knows our strengths and weaknesses, not just what we need and why, but God knows better than we what we need.

Our God is a loving God, not something to try and flee from, to avoid or placate. God’s presence is reassuring, and God wants to embrace us, and bring others into that embrace. And, if God is always there, God is always accessible to us, so God’s love and light is always accessible to us, That is the grace of God’s love.

Below is another translation of this psalm, one that I find expresses God’s grace and love for us in a joyful and prayerful way. Even the title is a better descriptor!

### **The LORD Is Always Near**

<sup>1</sup>You have looked deep into my heart, LORD and you know all about me.

<sup>2</sup>You know when I am resting or when I am working and from heaven you discover my thoughts.

<sup>3</sup>You notice everything I do and everywhere I go.

<sup>4</sup>Before I even speak a word, you know what I will say, <sup>5</sup>and with your powerful arm you protect me from every side.

<sup>6</sup>I can’t understand all of this! Such wonderful knowledge is far above me.

<sup>7</sup>Where could I go to escape from your Spirit or from your sight? <sup>8</sup>If I were to climb up to the highest heavens, you would be there. If I were to dig down to the world of the dead you would also be there.

<sup>9</sup>Suppose I had wings like the dawning day and flew across the ocean.<sup>10</sup> Even then your powerful arm would guide and protect me.<sup>11</sup> Or suppose I said, “I’ll hide in the dark until night comes to cover me over.”

<sup>12</sup>But you see in the dark because daylight and dark are all the same to you. <sup>13</sup>You are the one who put me together inside my mother’s body,<sup>14</sup> and I praise you because of the wonderful way you created me. Everything you do is marvelous! Of this I have no doubt.

<sup>15</sup>Nothing about me is hidden from you! I was secretly woven together deep in the earth below<sup>16</sup> but with your own eyes you saw my body being formed. Even before I was born, you had written in your book everything I would do.

<sup>17</sup>Your thoughts are far beyond my understanding, much more than I could ever imagine.

<sup>18</sup>I try to count your thoughts, but they outnumber the grains of sand on the beach.

And when I awake, I will find you nearby. Amen. (*Psalms 139: 1-18 CEV*)

*Rev. JoAnn Todd, Rector, The Regional Ministry of Hope*