

**“Words to Live By:  
To Follow”**

**John 1:43-51**

**March 10, 2019**

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*“Jesus found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’”*

**John 1:43**

**Prayer of Preparation**

O Lord, may you speak to our hearts and in them find no deceit. In Christ’s name, we pray: Amen.

**Sermon**

Words to live by, words to open up new worlds of meaning and purpose.

During the season of Lent, as we move through the Gospel of John, we will be focusing on words to live by. Simple words. Wonderful words. Words connected to encountering who Jesus is. Words like follow, reconcile, love, understand, know, serve. Important words, simple words. Beautiful words.

We use words, of course, to communicate with our friends and family. We use our words to conduct business. We use words to teach our children. Politicians use words to convince us that they’re the best candidate. I use words to communicate a message

Words are a huge part of every aspect of our lives. The average person says about 16,000 words a day. That’s 112,000 words every week. That’s over five million words every year. We use words. A lot.

And because we hear and use so many words every day, we can lose sight of how important they are. Sadly, we don’t seem to be taking care of how we use words, or of how we understand words, especially with the rise of social media. People throw words at each other like hand grenades, often not knowing (or maybe fully knowing) how they will affect others.

This week in the congress, for example, we saw what can happen when a person may use words in a particular way: words regarding Jews and Israel. Words that have a history of their own, words that can provoke painful memories.

So often we don't even realize the power of words. And we can often hurl words as a pitcher out of control on the mound, as they go in all kinds of directions.

I can remember as a child in little league: I would throw a pitch and it would go in any number of directions. I did not have good control. I was sure I was going to hit the batter, and I often did. Sometimes we can use words in that fashion – out of control. We don't stop to think what we are saying.

Then again, we can use words to heal, to love.

### **John's Gospel and Lenten Theme**

When we read the Gospel of John, we come across a Gospel that uses words in a very unique way, words that invite us to consider who Jesus is and what God is doing.

Even in our passage today, we can hear some of these words: words like "Follow me." "Come and see." "We have found the Messiah." Words that invite us to take a journey, to go on a trip, to become a disciple.

Perhaps we have heard these words before. And yet, as we hear Jesus call Philip and Nathanael we may wonder how they are weighing the words they are hearing (John 1:43-51).

For example, already in John's Gospel, Jesus had called Andrew and Peter to follow him. Indeed, Jesus invites the Andrew and Peter to "come and see" what God is doing and what is happening (John 1:39).

Unlike in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, where Jesus goes along the Sea of Galilee, calling the disciples to catch people, in John's Gospel Jesus seems to be going from town to town. Philip and Nathanael are the next in line.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See also Matthew 4:18-22, Mark 1:16-20, Luke 5:1-11.

What I find interesting is that apparently the disciples seem to have known one another. At least in our passage today we hear how Philip was from the same city as Andrew and Peter. Somehow they were connected, or at least, they knew each other.

And so, when Philip learns who Jesus is, as the One whom Moses and the prophets spoke, he immediately goes and tells Nathanael: “Come and see. We have found Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth” (John 1:45-46). They seem to have known more about Jesus than we may realize, at least about his family and hometown.

### **Can Anything Good Come Out of Nazareth?**

It is also clear that these disciples were people with very ordinary lives and biases, for what does Nathanael say to Philip? “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*” (John 1:46). His question belies a kind of prejudice: “What good can possibly come out of a backward place like Nazareth? We are talking about a carpenter’s son, not a figure of royalty. It doesn’t make sense.”

And yet, as Jesus approaches Nathanael, Jesus’ response is also quite telling, for rather than criticize Nathanael, Jesus pays Nathanael a compliment: “*Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit*” (John 1:47).

That’s not something we could say about everyone, not even about every Christian. Sadly, persons have deceit, a word that in the King James Version of the Bible is translated as guile: that is, in Nathanael, there was no guile; no trickery, no slyness. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* paraphrases Jesus’ statement as “Here is a real Israelite, with not a false bone in his body.” Sincere, upright, someone who is not looking for some kind of ethical wiggle room, not looking to get “one-up” on others.<sup>2</sup>

This is how Jesus responds to Nathanael’s put-down: with a compliment. In fact, Nathanael is surprised as to what Jesus actually knows about him and apparently the condition of his heart (John 1:48). Raising the question as to what Christ really knows about us! What does Christ see in us? Guile? Deceit? Humility? Words are important, remember?

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<sup>2</sup> See “Wigle Room” in *Homiletics* (January 15, 2012) at [www.homileticonline.com](http://www.homileticonline.com).

Whatever it was that Jesus recognized in Nathanael, it prompted Nathanael to confess Jesus as not only a rabbi and carpenter's son, but God's Son and Israel's King (John 1:49). Not a bad choice of words to describe such a person from the hills and hollers of Galilee! Nathanael will follow Jesus, despite his own bias toward him.

And in time Nathanael that he will see far greater things: Like Jacob's ladder, Nathanael will see the angels of God ascending and descending upon Jesus as he is lifted up, as Jesus goes to the cross" (John 1:53); and Nathanael will realize that in Jesus God will connect heaven and earth, and that wherever Jesus goes God will be present and signs of abundant life will follow (John 14:15).

A reminder that all discipleship involves interacting with Jesus. That one's identity as a disciple is always grounded in Jesus, that when Jesus calls us to *follow* him, Jesus wants us to demonstrate qualities that speak of who Jesus is, qualities like honesty, mercy, compassion, even curiosity or seeing where God might actually take us.

As I look at my own ministry, I can honestly say that I could not have imagined where Christ would lead me. After all, what good could possibly come out of Posey County, a small backwater of place?! It just doesn't make sense sometimes. What is the Dr. Seuss poem? "Oh, the places you will go and the people you will see!" *Learning* to follow is a journey.

But every person here is one that journey in some fashion, or else, why are you here? Maybe you have heard someone say, "Come and see." Or perhaps you have heard someone say, "We have found Christ." I don't know what words you may have heard, but words like "come, seek, knock, journey, call, follow" – all point to Jesus.

Indeed, when Jesus asks Peter and Andrew early on what they were looking for, I don't think they could have possibly imagined what they were actually looking for. I mean, did they fully understand that Jesus was the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world (John 1:29)?<sup>3</sup> Could they have possibly known what Jesus' words about being "lifted up" really meant, that he would draw

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<sup>3</sup> See also John 1:38.

*all* people unto himself, and that they themselves would probably die a death similar to his?<sup>4</sup>

### **What Are You Looking For?**

I don't know about you, but I know there are days when I wonder if I have truly found what I am looking for! Am I doing what I need to be doing? Am I doing what Christ called me to do? Have I found *it*? That great song by U-2 still rings in my ears: That I still may have not found what I am looking for!

And yet, I do believe we all are seeking and looking for something, even though we may not know how to go about it – asking what we need to do, where we need to go, who we need to talk to. We seem to be lost in doubt and uncertainty and fear, if not downright conflict, about following Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, I think that a book that needs to be required reading by everyone is a book by Sarah Holland and Beth Silvers – a Republican and a Democrat – called *I Think You're Wrong (But I'm Listening)*. They write about how conversations about politics have become toxic and hopeless: we have lost what we are to be about as human beings. People who sit together in churches can often become like strangers to each other and loved-ones as enemies. They suggest how Facebook and other forms of social media have only added fuel to the fire as persons post ugly memes or hate-filled rants. Folks who are supposed to be loving and kind turn angry and vengeful.<sup>6</sup>

Not hardly the character of a disciple! We no longer appear to value people as created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27), and we certainly do not appear to know what we are looking for!

This commentary easily translates to the deep divisions right now in the church over matters pertaining to human sexuality. We have all but lost respect for each other, consuming each other out of anger (Galatians 5:15). It is not about loving, but rather about winning and losing, certainly not listening, and certainly not seeking to understand, or in the words of Justin Welby, the Archbishop of

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<sup>4</sup> See John 3:14, John 12:34, and John 8:28.

<sup>5</sup> See Anthony C. Thistleton, *Doubt, Faith and Uncertainty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 62.

<sup>6</sup> See Sarah Stewart Holland and Beth Silvers, *I Think You're Wrong (But I'm Listening): A Guide to Grace-filled Political Conversations* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2019), xi.

Canterbury, learning what it means to disagree well. We are all but lost in nastiness and self-righteousness that we don't even know how bad we sound.

Indeed, we have forgotten John Wesley's first General Rule of Doing no harm!

When I study in Durham, England now, I am reminded by my Anglican brothers and sisters how challenging this is. (Maybe I will become Anglican!) In conversations, words matter, even bias matters, whether explicit or implicit.

### **What Does Christ See in You?**

For we all can sound like Nathanael: What good can possibly come out of Nazareth? What good can possibly come out of the mouth of a liberal or a conservative, a progressive or a populist?

As Pastor Jenothy shared last week: name the label or category and we will find ways to describe and divide the world between White-Black, rich-poor, gay-straight, Jew-Gentile, male-female, old-young, Christian-Muslim, Left-Right. Raising the question in a zero-sum world, *can anything good come out of anyone, anywhere?*

Can anything good come out someone like you? Like Me? What does Jesus see in your heart? What word would he use to describe you?

In a world bombarded with words, what is the word for you?

Amen.