

Pastor Joe Polzin  
John 1:43-51  
“Greater Things”

Year B – The Second Sunday after the Epiphany  
January 14, 2018

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

People today are always looking for the next greater thing. They’re always looking for what bigger, better, faster, greater. It’s easy to say this in reference to things like technology. It develops so quickly, it seems like once you’ve purchased a new TV, or computer, or phone, it’s already out-of-date. So, you have to be on the lookout for what’s next.

But I also think this “next greater thing” mentality is also a perspective on life that our society has adopted. We’re always in search of what the “next greater thing” is. What’s the next greater diet? The next greater money-managing strategy? The next greater exercising trend? The next greater medical treatment? The next greater inspirational way to live? It can actually become an addiction, never satisfied with what we have, always pursuing something that is just out of our reach. And even if we do get it, we may soon feel the urge to once again move on to something else.

Today, Jesus speaks to us about greater things. Except, instead of turning us toward a never-ending quest for something that is actually unattainable, we hear Jesus pointing Nathanael, and pointing us, toward something truly greater than all things, the greatest thing.

Our text this morning is our Gospel reading, from John chapter 1, beginning at verse 43. And there we find Jesus at the outset of his earthly ministry.

Epiphany is the season where we hear about the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Epiphany begins with the revelation of the Christ child to the Magi. It continues with the Baptism of our Lord, and John the Baptizer proclaiming Jesus to be the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29) It then describes Jesus calling his first disciples. And that’s where we are today. Jesus has just called two of John’s disciples to be his own, one of which was Andrew, who then brought his brother Simon Peter to Jesus.

And then we look at verse 43: “The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’” Philip then proceeded to find his friend Nathanael, and said to him, in verse 45, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” To which Nathanael said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (v. 46)

Many people criticize Nathanael for his words regarding the Messiah. Of course, we can look back on his words with our modern sensitivities and knowledge of who we know Jesus to be now. But before we come down too hard on Nathanael, I’ll point you to Jesus’ own words about him not one verse later: “Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, ‘Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!’” In other words, Nathanael may have been a guy who speaks his mind, but he’s also a guy who speaks the truth.

Nathanael was only expressing what the rest of Israel would have thought about a man from Nazareth claiming to be the one who fulfills the Law and the Prophets, claiming to be the Christ. The province of Galilee, where Nazareth was, was way up north, bordering unclean Gentile lands. It was too far from holy Jerusalem, which was in the southern province of Judea. No self-respecting Judean Jew would look for the Son of God, the King of Israel, in a place like

Galilee, let alone a small, lowly town like Nazareth. Jerusalem was the real center of kingly power and rabbinic wisdom. That's why the chief priests and the scribes were there. Nathanael, an Israelite indeed, as Jesus calls him, was only voicing what everyone else during Jesus' ministry would think, that no one expects a man like Jesus to be the Christ, the King of Israel.

Not to mention, the amount of time it had been that the people of Israel had been waiting for their Messiah to arrive. If they were still even waiting for the "next greater thing," they may have begun to doubt that he ever would come.

Still, face-to-face with this man now, Nathanael replied, "'How do you know me?' And Jesus answered him, 'Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you'" (v. 48).

Now, we're not exactly sure what this means, or what exactly Jesus was revealing to Nathanael. But it's clear, this was something Nathanael was not expecting Jesus to know. And in response, the truth-telling Israelite proclaims, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (v. 49)

Which is an interesting statement, because it seems it took so little for Nathanael to arrive at such a bold proclamation. And yet, was he correct? Well, Jesus is the Son of God. And he is the King of Israel. So, Nathanael is correct. But could he possibly understand all that his words meant? What Jesus says next indicates that he couldn't have. Without being wrong, Nathanael was not right. At least, not yet.

Look at verse 50: "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.'" The Israelites had long been awaiting the "next greater thing" – their Messiah and their king. And Jesus had come to be those things, but not in ways than anyone would have anticipated.

He tells Nathanael that he will see greater things. In fact, in the very next chapter of John's Gospel, Nathanael would see Jesus perform his first miracle at the wedding at Cana, turning water into wine, as well as Jesus cleansing the temple of money-changers. And throughout his years with Jesus, Nathanael will see sick people healed, dead people raised, lame people walk, hungry people fed. And in the eyes of the man, all this will truly seem like the "next greater thing." Almost all of Israel will be ready and willing to crown Jesus as King, proclaiming him to be the Son of God.

But as great as those things will be, Jesus is preparing Nathanael for something even greater. Look at verse 51, Jesus describes what the truly greatest moment will be. The moment, Jesus says, when heaven will be opened, "and the angels of God [will be] ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (v. 51).

So, what is that moment? Well, to answer that, we have to understand the reference. It's a reference that any Jew would have immediately picked up on. It's a reference to Genesis chapter 28, the account of Jacob's dream, where God came to Jacob in a dream, and spoke directly to him to assure him of God's *promise* and God's *presence*. And Jacob saw a staircase or a ladder connecting heaven to earth, and the angels of God were ascending and descending upon it. Jacob declares, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (28:10-17).

So do you see now what Jesus was saying? He said the angels of God would be ascending and descending on the *Son of Man*, upon *himself*. That *he* would be the bridge, the ladder, between heaven and earth, connecting us to God, and making God's *promise* and God's *presence* a reality for us. And what Jacob declared is therefore true of Jesus, that Jesus is none

other than the house of God (cf. John 2:19-22), the place of God's presence, the gate of heaven itself.

And when will this moment be? When will heaven and earth be *powerfully* connected in Jesus? Ironically, it will be in a moment of seeming *weakness*. It will be in the moment of his crucifixion and death. On Palm Sunday, the crowds will want to crown the powerful miracle-worker Jesus as their earthly king. In our Gospel reading, Nathanael proclaimed Jesus to be the Son of God and the King of Israel after hearing that he was under a fig tree. But Jesus tells Nathanael, and he tells us, that the truly greater thing will be when he offers himself unto death upon the cross. At that moment he will be for us our gate to heaven. To forgive the sins that stand between us and God, to re-connect us with our heavenly Father in a way that our sin once severed, and to freely provide for us the blessings of God's promise and God's presence.

But the people of Israel will look upon the cross with disdain. How could the King, the Christ, die in such a way? This does not seem bigger. This does not seem better. This does not seem greater. His disciples will flee. And he will die.

And it begs the question of *us*, do *we* always understand the greater things of God? If we had been at the foot of the cross, would we have understood why it was necessary for Christ to die? And I think if we're honest, of course, we'd have to say "no." Of course we don't understand what's truly greater. Only God does. Only God can.

But this is what our world is so caught up doing – judging and labeling what's greater, and what's worse. In order to have the greatest life, you need this kind of background, this kind of skin color, this kind of nationality, this kind of health, this kind of job, this kind of family, this kind of money, this kind of house, this kind of success. And when you don't have one or all of those things, your job is to constantly pursue "the next greater thing" by any means necessary. And around and around you'll go.

But what Christ is saying is that there is truly only one thing greater—himself. Nothing in our pursuit of "greater things" in this world will ever truly satisfy what our greatest need is, the need for a Savior. A Savior who would die for our sins, and who would bridge the gap that once was between heaven and earth.

And cross of Christ reminds us that sometimes God uses the things that, to our eyes, look worse, the things that look weak, the things that look like failure. Sometimes God uses even the things of a sin-infested and fallen world, like the cross itself, to accomplish His greater plan. Which means that not even sin and evil are beyond His ability to redeem and His power to use. And which also means that we should be cautious to say that something that God has allowed in our lives shouldn't be there, because we feel it should be something greater. That judgment is God's alone to make.

It is the Apostle Paul in Second Corinthians who describes a long battle with a "thorn" in his flesh (2 Cor. 12:7), which was likely a chronic disease of some kind. Paul says, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me." But Paul gives the Lord's response – "No." God said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." God didn't offer Paul an explanation, other than, for God, no weakness, no part of this fallen world, not even the cross, can stop Him from doing all that He intends to do.

And Paul's response? He said, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

This world would have us running away from all those things Paul listed, and running towards what it defines as “the next greater thing.” But by the power of Christ, and the transformative power of the faith that he’s given us, we aren’t concerned about “the next greater thing.” We’re only concerned about the “greatest thing,” which is Christ, and all he’s done for us and our salvation, by the cross, and by his resurrection. Which means we can even be content in hardships and weakness, because in Christ, even when we are weak, then we are strong. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.