

-When was the last time you were skeptical about something? (Probably not too long ago!) Maybe it's before a big job interview and you say "I don't think I'm qualified enough to get this job" or maybe it's someone's tall tales of adventure in the mountains somewhere and you think "I bet that really didn't happen!" Skepticism shows up in a lot of ways in our lives, sometimes to keep us safe ("that ice is definitely not thick enough for me to walk on") sometimes as self-protection ("I don't think she really is that into me"). Hold that thought for a second.

-During Epiphany, which is commonly remembered as the season of the 3 wise men "following the star", it's a common thing to talk about "following the light" or "following the call". Call-stories, our lectionary will make sure of, will be a common place in our scripture texts these next few weeks particularly this week and next week (we will read the call-story of Jesus and the disciples from the book of Mark next week).

-Sometimes, (I'll speak for myself) it's hard to read these Epiphany call-stories and not get a tinge of "call-story envy". I have no idea what it must be like to be a little boy and wake up to the voice of God like Samuel in our OT reading. My personal call-story can't really compete at all to that event that happened between Samuel and Eli. I also can't really compete to sitting on the beach, mending my fishing nets, bump into Jesus and then drop everything to follow. My call story of discussions with my Dad, events in Youth Group, classes in college, and living abroad sounds a little boring and definitely not as straightforward as some prophets of ancient Israel.

-Now the Gospel of John gets a little bit of a bad wrap because it kinda just appears in our church lectionary cycle. Unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke who each get their own full year of focus in the lectionary (we are currently in the year of Mark), John is sometimes treated as the "odd-man-out" and gets little times in the spotlight here and there, but then disappears. Apart from that, the style of Greek that John is written in is very different from that of the other gospels. It's the most poetic in its style and it's sentence structure is arguably the most complex. Think of Mark as an ESPN sports article and John as full commentary piece from The New Yorker Magazine in their Greek language structure.

-Because of this, John can have a bad wrap with his very complex descriptions of Jesus and other characters that can maybe make it seem "out of touch" a little more than the more straightforward in linguistic terms Synoptic Gospels.

-But I'll argue here that actually this call story from the Gospel of John, to me, is utterly refreshing and relates to me in a special way that the other call stories of Jesus don't. Why? Skepticism.

-More than any other NEW Testament call-story of Jesus that I know, none show a healthy dose of skepticism more than this story of Nathaniel in the Gospel of John. I really appreciate that a lot!

-So where is this skepticism coming from? It has to do with rivalries.

-To put into context, Jesus in the prior verses (as is indicated in our scripture text) has called Peter, Andrew, and Philip all of whom are from the same village: Bethsaida which is in the southern part of Israel/Palestine just south of Jerusalem. Philip gets so excited that he tells his friend Nathaniel who is from Cana (which is in the northern part of Israel/Palestine) about this guy from Nazareth. It's unclear whether this might have dawned on Philip or not, but Nazareth was a neighboring village to Cana in the north (they were only about 5 km away from each other). How many of you grew up or lived in a town with a rival? Rivals are real!

-Nathaniel puts it out there: "can anything good come from Nazareth??" Can anything good come from my rival village? Probably not!

-Here's where the beauty, and relevant part for me, of this story comes out: we have this amazing progression from skepticism to faith in Nathaniel's call story.

-Nathaniel starts off by being super skeptical, but is curious enough to seek out more. Notice how that skepticism is never condemned either, it's simply washed aside by both Jesus and Philip. Then Nathaniel comes to see Jesus and Jesus gives a very personal compliment: "Here is a true Israelite through and through!" (that's something coming from an arch-rival huh?) Nathaniel seems to get blown away by this and keeps asking a question: where did you know me? Jesus replied I "saw you". Nathaniel is then moved to faith. He follows the call.

-This story can remind us that call-stories are never about convincing. They are about showing. What has God shown you in your life? How has that led to your call? Were you on the skepticism spectrum when God (maybe through someone or something) showed you Christ? I know I was. And sometimes I continue to be. I think we all are and all should be on that healthy skepticism spectrum.

-This is where we get to that question of what does it mean to follow the call of Christ? Can you continue to be skeptical and faithful?

-To answer that, here's maybe where we get a little mixed up: The story of Nathaniel makes it clear that following the call of Christ doesn't mean showing *all the knowledge* you have in Christ. I was talking with a fellow church member this past week who explained how a group of Jehovah's Witnesses knocked on her door. She welcomed them in and had a good conversation with them as well as asked them some (in my opinion) pretty good Lutheran questions! In response to these questions, they brought up an incredible amount of scripture verses that they left her with, but didn't go much further. How many of us have had discussions with folks who seem to quote a bible verse ever 3rd sentence? A college professor of mine calls these "bible bullets". "I guarantee you," he would say, "none of us were probably brought to faith by feeling guilty and feeling shot up with bible bullets."

- Christ doesn't leave Nathaniel with 35 scripture quotes and says: convinced you yet? The call-story of Nathaniel is the showing of Christ. Period. For us then, following the

call of Christ in this church is also about simply showing Christ in our lives to others.

“Come and see.” The convincing is not our job as much as we think it might be.

-If you think about it, showing Christ in our lives: inviting someone to dinner or coffee, providing a helping hand, or simply being present in faithful conversation when one needs it, and more can be more honest to who we are as well. It gives more room for skepticism to be wiped away.....even among rivals.

-“Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Come and see.” Come and see how in Christ even rivals can be brothers and sisters. Come and see the ordinary become the extraordinary. Come and see the radical love and peace that God desires for this world. Come and see.....come and see. May we be able to follow the call, not be afraid of skepticism, and show Christ in as many ways in our lives as we can. Amen.