

**The Faith-book**  
**A Sermon Originally Offered at South Yarra Community Baptist Church**  
**Sunday, January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, Year B**  
**Readings: I Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139: 1-6; John 1:43-51**

'Come and see'. How many sermons based on this reading from the Fourth Gospel have used this three-word invitation as their text? A lot, I bet. The words almost beg to be used as an invitation to convince people to 'come to Jesus'. Another similar invitation is to 'try God'. Apparently, you can buy 'Try God' lapel pins in bulk for \$1.50 each!

However, the American Presbyterian minister Mark Davis has raised good questions about the assumptions behind lifting these words out of the Gospel text as an evangelistic slogan in an essay he wrote called 'The Politics of Vision':

(The) intent is honorable. However..., is God like a garment, hanging on display, subject to our choosing?...Are we even capable of looking at God, trying God on, or deciding if God fits our criteria? Is the Messiah an exhibition at which one comes to gawk and make judgments? (The) lapel pin and the slogan (assume) that—however active God may be in other ways—the salvific moment rests on our power of vision. It is up to us to "see"—in both the visual and the comprehension sense—then we are able to decide and choose. It is a view of humanity that resonates quite well with us when we have bought into the myth of the market, where something's worth lies solely in the eyes of the beholder.

In fairness, many of the experiences in our texts today do not come solely out of individual decision. The interaction between Phillip and Nathaniel provides the context for Nathaniel's encounter with Jesus. In the story of Samuel's call, it is the back-and-forth between the elder Eli and the younger Samuel which not only confirms Samuel's call but reawakens something in Eli. In the story we are reminded that it is a time when the spark of faith, of vision, of bold dreams for the future were not easily found, and something worse took hold of the worshipping community. Yet, when the young boy keeps bothering his mentor saying, 'You called me', something is awakened within the old man: 'Ah, yes, I remember! – Go lie down, and if you hear the voice again, say "Speak, for your servant is listening."' "

Even before Samuel gets his direction from Eli, before Nathaniel makes his profession of faith that Jesus is the Messiah, we learn that they are seen before they see. Jesus says to Nathaniel, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Phillip saw you.' Samuel hears the voice before he is guided in how to make sense of it. The Psalmist says, 'Lord, you have searched me and known me; you know when I sit and when I stand'. We are reminded that, as important as our responses and decisions are, before we know, we are known. Before we understand, we are understood. Before we say 'Yes', 'Yes' is said to us.

With these ideas in mind, I was thinking – what you put in a memoir of your journey, to this point? It might be a photo album, or a scrapbook, or in these days of ICT, a social media page, or website, or 'Faithbook page' if you like. What memories would be represented there? What pictures, events, weblinks, would you include in it, as signs of the people and events which have brought to this time and place?

Among the things on my 'Faithbook site', there'd be a picture of my intermediate Sunday School teacher and a link to the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which she used as our Lenten study guide on year. There'd be a pdf scan of one of the Fold-Out Sunday school resources which she used so adeptly, to teach our class that faith is a real, living thing, engaging all the very real issues of our world.

There would be a composite painting, or sketch, of the services of baptism from my home church<sup>1</sup>. I say a composite because the two ministers I remember the most when I was growing up each did distinct things from which I learned of the importance of the drama of worship. When one minister baptized, I could see there was water in his hands, and I could see the drops of water glisten in the sunlight which came through our church windows. Another minister would take the baptized child, walk to the middle of the centre aisle in the midst of the congregation, stand there, and recite the Words of Welcome, 'We receive this child into this congregation of Christ's flock...'

I would have some mementos of the testimony meetings from the United Church congregations I served for a short time in rural Newfoundland as a student minister. In these churches<sup>2</sup>, it's known as the 'after-service', a time of praise singing, testimony, and prayer which took place after the end of the 'first service', after the sermon was preached. I learned that a spoken testimony has specific 'moves', or stages to it, so I could even link to an essay that would be called, 'A Spoken Discourse Analysis of the Evangelical Testimony' (if such a research article hasn't been written yet, I could write it)! As a reminder of that, I'd include a old worn tape recording of one saint of the church who would almost always start his testimony the same way: 'I'm so glad to stand before you on another Sabbath evening to tell the world that I'm still trusting in Jesus.'

I also learned that even evangelical praise worship, a worship which claims to be exclusively 'from the heart', has its own ritual actions. To that end, I'd include the sheet music of a chorus, 'Worthy of Honor...'. It would be there as a reminder of the time when we were singing this chorus, and a woman came to the communion rail, took my hand and swung it with me in perfect rhythm, her eyes closed in bliss, and my face trying to be cool while my inside were saying, 'What the -?!'. Fortunately, someone took pity on me and said to me afterward, chuckling, 'Oh, she was just rejoicing with you!' These experiences do not represent how I express my faith today, but they certainly widened my awareness of the variety of ways people express their faith, even in the liberal and progressive United Church of Canada!

I'd have a picture of the girl who was learning about Holy Communion in a Sunday School class I was leading, who served the elements to her classmates with the same ease and reverence you would expect of an experienced church elder. I'd have another picture of a young girl at the one time we had a Children's Time at Open Doors Church. I was doing something about the remembrance of baptism, and this girl dipped her hand in the baptismal chalice, made the sign of the cross on her mother's forehead, and said, 'God loves you just as you are'.

I'd have a link to a FB group called 'Help Hanoi's Homeless', started by a young man from Manchester, England, whom I got to know in Hanoi, Vietnam. He briefly experienced homelessness in the UK, so when he came to Hanoi, he gathered a group of people and just went out on Thursday nights after the bustle of Hanoi died down, and with whatever we brought, made sure the homeless had food, water, clothing, and basic medical care. I don't think I've ever experienced the immediacy of living out a witness to social justice as much as I did on those Thursday nights.

I'd have a jpeg picture of some faded notes from a Systematic Theology course seminar. In that seminar, the lecturer explained his understanding of the Protestant doctrine of predestination. In his understanding, predestination was not originally intended to be a sorting system to separate those whom God chose from the beginning of time to have eternal salvation from those who would have eternal

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<sup>1</sup> I realize I'm preaching in a Baptist church and I come from a tradition which allows for the baptism of children of believing parents, so I ask that we suspend that debate for now,

<sup>2</sup> To explain why congregation in the liberal 'United Church of Canada' had testimony meetings would require an explanation of the history of the origin of Methodism in Newfoundland that would take me 'off course' from the themes of this sermon.

conscious torment. It was originally a way of assuring the believer that they could trust in their salvation, because it did not depend solely on their will, power, or discernment, that human powers alone are not the ultimate power of the universe.

I'd have links to the covers of the book, 'Shaking of the Foundations' by Paul Tillich, which probably contains the best summary of the moment of grace in the statement, 'Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!' There'd be links to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and to John A T Robinson's *Honest to God*.

I'd have an mp4 video of Troy Perry, the founder of Metropolitan Community Churches, who, in the depths of his despair as a gay man, heard 'the still small voice in the mind's ear' which said, 'You are my son! I don't have step-children!' And there'd be an mp3 audio sermon by Malcolm Sinclair, the recently retired minister of worship at Metropolitan United Church in Toronto. It's a sermon from Christmas Eve 2013 called 'The Christless Protestant', and it was while I was listening to that sermon that I felt the tap on my shoulder – even me, someone who had decided he was done with organized religion 16½ years before – and the still, small voice in my mind's ear which said, 'It's time.'

These would be the things on my 'Faithbook' page, and you would have things on your page which are special to you. But in them all, I'm convinced we would discover the times when we said, 'Yes', and the times when others influenced us, and most importantly, the times in our lives when we learned that God said 'Yes' to us first. And yet, I would need to leave space for more, and you would need to leave space, because we live with the conviction that greater things will come. That's the promise Jesus made to Nathaniel. To paraphrase that promise of Jesus, I'd have an audio of that Canadian rock song, 'You ain't seen nothing yet!' In a sense, our Faithbooks can never truly be full until that time when we finally become enfolded in that eternal love which will not let us go. Until that time, may we always have room in our Faithbooks for new experiences, new people, and new opportunities to be seen.