

## Sermon: Come and See!

On the church calendar the season after Christmas is called Epiphany. “Epiphany” is not a word we use very often these days, or maybe your life experience has presented you with an epiphany or two.

The word Epiphany can have two meanings.

Epiphany can mean “an appearance or manifestation of God.” This kind of epiphany literally means God-appearance. So, when we observe the Epiphany season, we celebrate God appearing to us in the person of Jesus.

The Old Testament records several epiphanies, from God to the people of Israel. For example, we read from 1 Samuel of the young Samuel receiving an epiphany from God. God calls to Samuel in the night, but Samuel thinks it is his adoptive father, the prophet Eli. This happens three times until Eli realizes it is God and instructs Samuel to reply, “Speak, your servant is listening.” So when God calls Samuel a fourth time, Samuel replies as he had been instructed: “Speak, your servant is listening.”

Second, epiphany can mean “a moment of sudden insight or understanding.” This kind of epiphany might also be called a “eureka!” moment. An example of this is when two disciples experienced their “eureka” moment when they realized the identity of the man who joined them on the Emmaus Road. During the seven-mile walk, the disheartened disciples told their new companion about the crucifixion of Jesus and the empty tomb. Perhaps confused by recent events, they were unable to identify the man who unpacked Scripture and explained the journey from suffering to glory that Jesus had to endure.

Only later, when he broke bread and gave thanks, did they recognize Jesus. That was their “Eureka” moment.

There is a true feeling of excitement when you have an epiphany. There’s joy when you’re suddenly struck by a profound insight. This is especially so when it’s about something you’ve been trying to figure out for a long time, but the answer has always eluded you.

This morning’s story from John’s Gospel suggests that the two meanings of the word “epiphany” are related. The big idea from the story is this: **When we encounter God in Jesus, we see reality differently.**

If we back up to the beginning of John, we will notice that Jesus’s encounter with Nathanael is the last of four epiphanies described in this chapter.

John begins with the great prologue: “In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God”. John identifies Jesus as the very Word of God and, indeed, with God’s own being. He then switches from the metaphor of speech to the metaphor of sight. This Word, Jesus, is also the Light. We hear that Jesus is “the light that shines in the darkness.”

So, God sends John the Baptist to talk about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. We read that “No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father’s heart. He has revealed God to us.”

This introduction gives us all the pieces to understand the narrative: Though the world is created by the Word of God, the world is in darkness and cannot see God. God sends his Word into the world to be a light to the world so that the world can see God. That light is testified to by witnesses—those who have encountered the light and call others into the light.

The narrative of John begins with John the Baptist testifying to his people about the light that is about to appear. He sees Jesus and tells his followers, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” He recounts how he saw the Holy Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on Jesus. Then he concludes with, “I saw this happen to Jesus, so I testify that he is the Chosen One of God.”

John the Baptist experienced an epiphany, and he testifies about it to others. So, he tells two of his disciples, “Look! There is the Lamb of God!” These two disciples of John the Baptist then become disciples of Jesus.

One of them, Andrew, runs and finds his brother, Simon, and testifies to him, “We’ve found the Messiah”. Then Simon, whom Jesus calls Peter, joins his brother Andrew as a disciple.

And that leads to this morning’s reading. Jesus finds Philip—who is from the same town as Andrew and Peter—and calls him to be a disciple. Philip then runs off and finds his buddy Nathanael. Just as John the Baptist had testified to Andrew, and Andrew has testified to Simon Peter, so now Philip testifies to Nathanael, “We have found the very person Moses and the prophets wrote about! His name is Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

But now we encounter the first roadblock in this succession of testimonies and conversions. Unlike Andrew, Simon, and Philip, who are all from the town of Bethsaida on the far northeast side of the Sea of Galilee, Nathanael is from the west side.

He’s from the town of Cana, which is just a couple miles from the small town of Nazareth, which is also on the west side. So, when he hears his buddy Philip

breathlessly declaring that they found the long-awaited Messiah in the little town of Nazareth, he is sceptical.

“Nazareth!” he responds. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”.

Nazareth isn't mentioned anywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. There's no prophecy declaring that the Messiah will come from there. It's such an insignificant town that there's no known record of it anywhere outside the Gospels and the book of Acts until around 150 years later.

Archaeologists and historians think it probably had a population of about 400 people. So, we can probably sympathize with Nathanael's dismissive question about the town.

Philip doesn't try to argue with Nathanael. He doesn't give him an apologetic seminar about how Hebrew prophecy proves that Jesus must be the Messiah. He simply invites Nathanael, “Come and see for yourself”.

Then there's another twist. Before Nathanael sees Jesus, Jesus sees him. Jesus calls out, “Now here is a genuine son of Israel—a man of complete integrity”.

Nathanael is taken off guard when he asks, “How did you know about me?”

Jesus responds with what seems to be a straightforward answer: “I could see you under the fig tree before Philip found you”.

For some reason—that's not entirely clear to the reader—this answer strikes Nathanael hard. Or perhaps it's not so much the answer as the one who gives it. But for whatever reason, Nathanael has a sudden epiphany. He goes from doubting that anything good, much less the Messiah himself, could come from Nazareth to immediately declaring to Jesus: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God—the King of Israel!”.

Nathanael's confession goes beyond what even Philip had told Nathanael of Jesus. Philip had said they found the Messiah, but Nathanael has had an epiphany.

He has encountered the Son of God.

The Word who became flesh.

The light who brings light.

God the One and Only.

Jesus seems almost a little amused by Nathanael's stunning reversal.

He then turns to all the disciples who have witnessed this encounter: "I tell you the truth, you will all see heaven open and the angels of God going up and down on the Son of Man, the one who is the stairway between heaven and earth".

This image sounds strange to us, but it would have been perfectly understandable to his disciples, especially Nathanael, whom Jesus had just called "a genuine son of Israel."

In Genesis 28, the patriarch Jacob, whose name is later changed to Israel, has a dream. In this dream he sees a ladder stretching from earth to heaven, and on the ladder, Jacob sees angels of God ascending and descending. Beside the ladder, Jacob sees God, who declares, "I am God, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God of your father, Isaac".

And so, when he awakes, he has an epiphany.

When Jesus tells Philip, Andrew, Simon Peter, and Nathanael that they will "see heaven open and the angels of God going up and down on the Son of Man, the one who is the stairway between heaven and earth," he is declaring that he is the gateway to heaven.

In Jesus "lives all the fullness of God in a human body," as Paul wrote to the Colossians.

That means that when we see Jesus, we see God.

We experience an epiphany.

I'm expecting we have all experienced at least one epiphany in our lifetime, and I am trusting that we can only expect more, with God in our lives and Jesus as our Saviour. There is so much more for us to learn and to share in the worship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen