

2nd Sunday after Epiphany
1.17.21

John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

I haven't been sleeping well. I imagine I'm not the only one. The closer we get to inauguration day, the less I'm able to sleep through the night. I worry about the violence we've already seen, and what we've learned about its perpetrators—that they real, they're committed, they're connected to one another, and they're among us. I worry that more of this lies ahead for us, that still more lives will be lost to this second coming of the lost cause.

Just as pressing is my worry about the minds that seem lost to us. What were they *thinking*? Like, actually, what was the content of their thinking, beyond assertions and talking points, but actual actuality?

When the kids were young—my sons Tobias and Jack—and I'd catch them mid-endeavor, some grand scheme that would take over the garage or the kitchen or their bedroom, I'd ask them, "What's the plan, here?" It's a question that would often frustrate them. But that was partly my hope. Ask an eight-year-old and a ten-year-old who are armed with a hammer, a shovel, a NERF gun, and some bungy cords, while the dogs follow along wagging their tails, what the plan is, and you might quite possibly have saved a life.

It also probably would have given you a good laugh—as it should. Kids!

Not so this week.

Nevertheless, I'll ask, what was the plan here? What did they *think* would happen? And I mean those who *weren't* bent on taking hostages and maybe even committing murder. What did the more casual stormer of the Capitol actually hope to accomplish? A real estate agent from

Texas, a florist from Tennessee, a young man from West Virginia who lives with his grandmother: I have exhausted myself this week wondering, what were they thinking? Because they can, for example, take the podium of the Speaker of the House, but that wouldn't actually make them Speaker of the House, and wouldn't make it so Nancy Pelosi wouldn't be Speaker of the House, which they must certainly have known, right?

I get that they might not have known about sedition. I get that they might even have thought they were simply taking their turn. After the summer of looting by the outraged left, now was their turn, a winter of looting by the outraged right—as if looting a Macy's or a Target is equivalent to looting the Capitol building. "Fair is fair." They aren't equivalent, though. They're both wrong, but they're not equivalent. One is the seat of government, which means that in taking that podium, though with it you won't become the Speaker of the House, you will be understood as attacking the House, its Speaker, and the government which gives it legitimacy.

And that's sedition. And it's a felony. And it's punishable with up to twenty years in prison.

I get that these finer points weren't argued out on chat boards and in Facebook groups. Even so, there was a weird goofing around about it all, a "milling about." This was the word in more than a few captions to photos from that day in newspapers: a "milling" about. As if milling about in the rotunda was the point. As if milling about in the chamber would accomplish a victory. Where it wasn't frightening and dangerous, it was simply bizarre.

There was a cosplay aspect to it, the costumed play that many adults now engage in—going to Star Wars conferences dressed as their favorite characters from the franchise, going to Harry Potter conferences dressed as someone from Hogwarts. Some of my favorite people in the world immerse themselves in these worlds of play, so I'm not throwing shade here.

Really, I suppose some of them would cast a glance in my direction. What am I doing in my fancy robe officiating over magic bread but enacting a world largely of my imagining?

Okay, so now whole swaths of the population seem not to understand the difference between Dungeons and Dragons and the Capitol building—which they've been whipped up not to understand, they've been *lied* to not to understand. The big lie, it's now being called, the final lie that all those little lies have prepared ground for.

The internet doesn't help us here—this vast, limitless space that is largely unaccountable to reality, where assertions of reality are real enough, where allegations have the tendency to take on real effect, so allegations of allegations are not far behind. “I'm not saying that something happened, I'm just saying some people are saying something happened,” which is enough to get people going around that thing having happened.

The pandemic also doesn't help us here—as so much of our real lives have been lost to us in the name of avoiding death on the scale of the 1918 flu pandemic. We'll probably make it under that albeit high bar. Meanwhile, the surreal space we actually find ourselves inhabiting has made unreal spaces seem also possible. If it's possible that someone eating a bat for lunch on the other side of the world two years ago has made it so we can't gather in church as the likes of us have done for hundreds of years and that my kids can't go to school as they have done since they were three years old, then maybe it's possible, all the things Q-Anon suggests, which I won't repeat here because it's the repetition of these things that give them their power. We're in a world of mimesis, imitation, mimicry. This hall of mirrors can make all those images of images be felt as real and can cause us to respond to it all as if real, which makes it practically real.

And now it's real.

So, here is the truly horrifying thing, they believed it. In some way, in some space in their imaginations, they believed it. Whatever wild story they'd been told, or had suggested to them, by anonymous sources online, or by friends on Facebook who claim to have done “their own research,” and by prominent people in their government (Representative Boebert, Senators Hawley and Cruz), they believed it. And it got them on busses and airplanes, in cars and caravans, to come to the Capitol to play, party, enact, mill about, storm, terrorize, commit sedition, murder.

They believed it.

So now we turn our attention to Philip and Nathaniel, Philip for whom “Follow me” was enough, Nathaniel for whom “Come and see” was enough. But please don't ask me, what's the difference between these two and that florist from Tennessee. Please don't suggest that there's some similarity between these two examples of credulity.

But, you say, Philip and Nathaniel do indeed seem to have decided to follow Jesus without much to go on—even less than a couple Q drops, as the hints and suggestions that Q-Anon drops

online from time to time are called. Q drops. Here, we simply have Jesus' presence, and John's witness.

For what it's worth, I'd say that's the difference. In Jesus, Nathaniel and Philip had presence, the anchoring effect of which is lacking in so much of our lives these days. Presence, the presence of another: simple, true, undeniable presence.

As for John's witness, he had been baptizing at the river Jordan when, now in Bethany, Jesus happened by. At this, John declared, "Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," which is a phrase worthy of a sermon, but for which you'll have to wait until the 2nd Sunday of Epiphany in Year A, which is 2023.

His saying it that first time didn't garner much response, according to the story.

The next day, though, Jesus again was walking by John, and John again declared, "Here is the Lamb of God!" and this time two of John's disciples turned from following him to following Jesus.

The next day after that, this happened—first Philip ("Follow me."), then Nathaniel ("Come and see.")

And isn't it interesting, this counting down of the days. Like in Genesis, when God began to create, with each day another act of creation (Light! Day and night! Dry land and Water!), so here, in this gospel, which begins in the beginning, there is now a counting of days, each one an act of creation which is though on-going, each day a building up of a community of the beloved. (An arrival, a word declared, a couple of disciples, a couple more!) The genesis of this whole movement is a harking back to the genesis of the creation. A simple word and an active response, and you get a whole new world that is indeed good, very good.

This is the point John's gospel is trying to make. This gospel narrative is less about taking each event at face value. This gospel means for things to be understood on several levels. So, the call of the disciples does here seem to have mysterious power, near magic effect—because it's to recall the first call of God's act of creating.

For this ripe way of speaking, this gospel is often considered gnostic, a story told as if having secret meaning, a story told in such a way that only some will "get." Gnosticism is an ancient heresy that swore by secret knowledge and functioned to keep some certain set of people as truly in the know while the rest of the people continued to bumble along benighted. What's more,

those with the secret knowledge would, by this means, be saved or exalted. For these, the Jesus we meet in the gospel of John was taken to be a bearer of such secret knowledge and a maker of a secret club.

That's a misreading of it, by the way. That's to misread this gospel, which isn't about secret knowledge but about public revelation, and which isn't about Jesus as a teacher of secret knowledge but about Jesus as the savior of the whole world.

As it happens, one scholar considers Q-Anon and all its adherents a modern iteration of this ancient heresy. Dartmouth professor of English, Jeff Sharlet, explained to Bob Garfield on the podcast *On the Media*, that this heresy dates back the second century, shortly after the Gospel of John was written. "In its original form is this idea that the God we see is not the real God, but just something that they call a demiurge, a kind of apparatus behind which is the real power. And the way you know this power is not through expertise or through study, but simply through experience. You know it in your gut..." This is to say, this knowledge dodges the faculties of reason and critical thinking. You know it's true because it *feels* true.

Free, though, from any critique, Gnosticism embraces contradictions without any stops, considers them paradoxes, though they are actually just contradictions, insinuations upon sloppy thinking. For this, this demiurge can be understood both as occupying a position of power, while also simultaneously fighting those who wield the real power, wielding it though in secret, in silence. Bob Garfield asked after this, that the one with power can also be fighting far greater powers, so this demiurge is also credited as a victim, in need of our sympathy and our praise and our loyalty. "I'm not quite sure how both of those can be true at the same time," he said. But that's to apply reason to an assertion of truth that insists upon going straight for the gut.

It recalls to me when Ronald Reagan addressed from the Oval Office in 1987 the Iran-Contra events and his role in them. "A few years ago," he said, "I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that's true. But the facts and the evidence tell me it is not." At least he was willing to admit in some facts and evidence, though he did lay those two things side by side for us to choose, objective facts or his personal feelings, as if such choosing is valid in a body politic.

It's not.

Now, though, we're not even offered a choice, as a body politic, as an electorate. Now, the assertions of power come uncoupled from any recognition that there are such things as facts and evidence, that there is anything other than stirrings in the gut.

That's a very malleable place from which to be governed as a people, or from which even to organize the self.

I want you to know that I've never said anything from this pulpit that I didn't first probe to test its holding truth. I've never professed anything in a sermon that I haven't tested out for its veracity.

Actually, my years in divinity school were a crucible in that regard. I didn't know in going in that this would be the case, but I did, over my four years there, discover it to be the case—that when I began I was bringing to school my childhood faith, when I began study for my M.Div. I was bringing with me the world as it had been given to me by people I trust. My pastor, my church-going parents, my outdoor ministry summer camp where I'd been a camper and then a member of the staff: it was a world that had been verified in my gut. It felt good and true, the thought that love has the power to save. I'd seen it with my own eyes, that a person could organize his whole life around the abiding presence of some creative, personal spirit. I believed in God, from the gut, but so did all these people for whom such belief seemed to open them up and draw them out.

And I brought all this to school, to "div. school."

And what a relief it was to discover it was true—in some objective, time-tested way. It was all true!

Yes, what an astonishing thing, that some of the sharpest minds of the last two thousand years had applied themselves to these ancient murmurings and, lo!, those murmurings continued to speak, to hold truth, to generate life, to build up community. And some would come at it in the spirit of deconstruction. And some would come at it in cynicism or at least irony. But, I'll be damned: it still held true, it still holds true.

I want you to know, hardly a day goes by that I don't walk up once again to the edge of the known world and peer as best I can into the unknown—where there is either nothing or there is everything. I game it out again, a yearning from the gut filtered through the sharp teeth of the mind, the sharp scalpel of reason—the question as to which formulation of what mystery surrounds us seems true and stands to reason and teaches me how to live. I do it all the time, sometimes

awake to it in the middle of the night, often in conversation with it on walks or while doing chores. Is this really what I believe? Is this really what I think is true? I read up on it in the early mornings, I chase it down through my days and weeks, chase it as if lives depend upon it (because they do).

I want you to know, it always returns to me: the Word of God from before time, made flesh in time so to live among us and to walk with us and to suffer for us and to demand of us a willingness to suffer for one another, this sometimes high cost of discipleship, all to die at the hands of world powers and principalities, only to return to us to speak to us peace and to walk with us once and forever again so to gather us into beloved community made alive and faithful by the Holy Spirit, so that by him the world will be saved, or that by him the world has already been saved, which saving we might enter into now, live out now, in love and joy and courage and grace. Hence my fancy robe. Hence the magic bread, which is just ordinary bread, truth be told, which is, of course, part of its magic. These are symbols of the truth, by which we're bound closer to the truth.

Did you know that's what a symbol is? A symbol is an enactment of the truth, an enactment so in a register that we can access and play amidst.

For this, don't ever disregard the symbolic.

For this, don't ever accept it as a degrading term, considering something *just* a "symbolic" act. For something to be truly symbolic, there is in it the presence of truth.

It is, though, a matter of degree. The symbolic can degrade into something more akin to the diabolic, which is to separate us from the truth. Do you hear that? Have you ever noticed that? Symbolic and its degraded variant, diabolic? In the symbolic, there is an essential semblance or similarity to what abides as eternal. In the diabolic, there is a dissembling, an essential deception or leading away from what abides as eternal.

This is what those in the early church were trying to distinguish from one another in calling out heresy. This is why the notion of heresy came up at all—to recognize that the things of the symbolic, which is a holding together, can be used for the diabolic, which is a leading away.

Those long-ago churchmen so concerned with heresy: I've been known to laugh at their prudishness and rectitude.

I'm not laughing now.

We've got a problem, we the people of the United States. Many, many of our countrymen and woman have been lead away from the truths that hold us.

We need to get them back. We need to hold some of them criminally accountable, and we need to get them back

Apparently, the best way to do that is love.

That's what expert voices have to tell us, and let's please listen to expert voices. The best way to win back those whose minds have been captured by cults that deceive is not to argue with them, or to present them with facts and evidence, but to love—to listen, to be patient, to witness and to accept and to love.

It's a pressing question, whether we can do this on the scale that it is now required of us, and whether we can do this given the practical problems still present—the internet, the pandemic. But isn't it astonishing, that the saving power is the one we've always professed it would be: love?

Isn't that amazing, that these ancients truths might yet be true...?

Thanks be to God.