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## The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

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#### Jesus Calls Us to Follow

After his baptism in the Jordan River Jesus began his ministry. Intrigued by the witness of John the Baptist, a few pious believers sought Jesus out, and Jesus invited them to follow him. Still today, in ways that are both usual and unusual, Jesus invites people to follow him—and we are among those whom Jesus has invited.

<b>First Reading</b>	<b>1 Samuel 3:1-10</b> <i>The Lord called Samuel and Samuel listened.</i>
<b>Second Reading</b>	<b>2 Thessalonians 2:13-17</b> <i>God calls us to Christ through the gospel.</i>
<b>Gospel</b>	<b>John 1:43-51</b> <i>Jesus called skeptical Nathanael to follow him.</i>
<b>Sermon</b>	<b>John 1:43-51</b>

Introduction: Jesus was hardly dry after his baptism in the Jordan River when people started following him. The exact number—at least the ones the Bible writers tell us about—was five. They had some things common. They were all men and they were all young, a little less or a little more than 30—about the same age as Jesus. Today we'd call them blue collar workers. They were from all Galilee and most of them from the town of Bethsaida, way up north from Jerusalem. Jerusalem Jews considered them bumpkins—maybe like we think about UPers. But these guys took their religion seriously. When they heard that a prophet named John was preaching and baptizing in the Judean desert, they took off from their jobs and went to hear him. It was a long walk—70 miles, at least three days—but what John was preaching intrigued them. He was preaching that Messiah had come and there wasn't a serious Jew in all of Judea who wasn't waiting for Messiah. Well, they found John and then they found Jesus. John made it a no-brainer: **Look**, he said, **the Lamb of God**. And that's when those five men started following Jesus.

It doesn't happen exactly like that anymore but it happens kind of like that. A mom and dad bring a newborn to baptism and that newborn, without actually knowing it, starts to follow Jesus. A few years later mom and dad are reading Bible stories to that three-year old, and now the child begins to know whom he's following. The relationship that started with a date gets serious, and the young woman tells her boyfriend about Jesus. Little by little, the boyfriend starts to follow his girlfriend's Lord. The guy fell into alcoholism, he abused his wife and kids and then he lost his job. One night on a hard bed in a beat-up homeless shelter he remembered the Savior he once adored and he followed again. She was a friend of a friend and listened to her friend's friend talk about Jesus. She listened again and again and pretty soon she followed Jesus. No John the Baptist, no Jordan River, no face-to-face encounters, but Jesus is still calling people to follow him. Do you ever think about this? Do you know when and where and how Jesus called you to follow?

Every day in many ways Jesus calls people all over the world to follow him. He does the same to us. He's called us before, obviously, but he calls us again, even today. We don't think about it too much, so there's probably a good reason to think about it—even today. So we're going to watch Jesus in action in today's Gospel as two young men follow his call. We'll see how Jesus called them and then we'll see that:

**Jesus Calls Us to Follow Him**

1. In Bible times it usually happened like this. A new teacher would come on the scene and he would attract attention; people would follow him. There was no church building or Bible class. They would hang out with the teacher and go where he went. That's how it happened with Jesus. John and Andrew, two of those first five, saw Jesus and started to walk with him. And they kept walking with him. Andrew ran into his brother Simon Peter, and Peter joined the group. And that's where today's Gospel starts.

Jesus decided it was time to head for home, time to leave the Baptist at the Jordan and head for Galilee. So the long walk began. Along the way Philip, one of the Bethsaida buddies, hooked up with his friends. Jesus noticed him and simply said, **Follow me**. And Philip did. Then Philip invited his friend Nathanael. But let's save Nathanael for later and talk about Philip.

Philip was obviously an Old Testament believer and he knew his Bible. When he found Nathanael, he told him, **We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote**. The one Moses wrote about—the one Philip was thinking of—was the one Moses said would be a new prophet the people needed to hear. The one the prophets wrote about was the one who would be a sacrifice for sin and king for God's people. We don't know how long Philip walked with Jesus, but it doesn't seem to have taken long before he was convinced that this ONE was no one other than **Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph**. Philip wasn't a finished product, not by any means. For example, he didn't have a clue that Jesus would be able to feed the 5,000. When Jesus asked about him about buying bread, he flunked the test. On the night before Good Friday Jesus wanted his disciples to see his connection with his Father in heaven, but Philip failed again. He was absolutely sure on this day, but not so sure on the days ahead. Of course, Jesus knew it.

Nathanael wasn't sure at all. He was another Old Testament believer. If he was sitting under shady fig tree, he was probably doing what a lot of Old Testament believers did: when they rested from the sun they remembered passages from the Scriptures. Very common back then. But when he heard the writings of the Old Testament connected to someone from Nazareth, he wasn't sure what to think: **Nazareth? Can anything good come from there?** But he came along with Philip and Jesus saw him coming. He said, **Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit**. So Jesus knew the Old Testament faith was in his heart.

The truth is that Jesus always knows the people he calls to follow. He knew Philip before he called him and he knew Nathanael, too. He called them despite their doubts and their confusion. He called them even though he knew they would sometimes fail. He called them because he knew they were looking for truth; they hadn't found the truth, not the whole truth, but they hadn't rejected it, either. Jesus wouldn't cast pearls before pigs, but these men weren't pigs.

Jesus knows us, too. The good Lord knows we have our doubts, plenty of them. Sometimes we doubt Jesus loves us when we sin, sometimes we doubt he cares about us when we're sick, sometimes we doubt he provides for us when we're feeling the pinch, sometimes we doubt he's there when we're lonely. We get confused, too—plenty. We get confused when we're tempted to sin, when we think about difficult choices, when we're uncertain about our goals in life, when we hesitate to make the sacrifices Christians sometimes have to make. We aren't pigs who reject the pearls about Jesus—and we better beware that we don't become pigs like that. But we have found truth and we want to be sure it's true. Some days we're as sure as Philip, and other says we're as unsure as Nathanael. Jesus knows our hopes and fears, he knows our sins and failings, and he still calls us to follow him. And he does exactly the same with millions of others.

2. On this particular day, Nathaniel was unsure, but Jesus changed all that real fast. When Jesus called him an Israelite with no guile, Nathaniel was shocked. **How do you know me, he asked. Jesus answered, I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you**. Well, that was enough for Philip: **Teacher, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel!** Sometimes it happens that way. It happened that way for St. Paul on the way to Damascus. One minute a Christ-hater, the next minute a Christ-believer. The Roman centurion watched Jesus die on Calvary and said, **Truly this was the Son of God**. One minute a Christ-killer, the next minute a Christ-confessor. It happens that way sometimes. Sometimes following Jesus happens fast.

But it's not always that way. Jesus said to Nathaniel, **You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that**. And then Jesus took Philip back to a Bible story he knew by heart. You know it, too. Jacob was Isaac's son and Abraham's grandson—remember Jacob?—Jacob was running away from his brother Esau and he landed in the middle of nowhere with nothing to his name. At the end of a long day Joseph laid down and rested his head on a stone—that was his pillow. **He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord** and he

spoke to Jacob: **I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.** With that Old Testament story embedded in Nathanael's mind, Jesus a New Testament application. He said to Nathanael, **Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.** Did Nathaniel catch on? Maybe, maybe not. But we catch on. When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, the heavens opened again and the Lord spoke again, this time to Jesus: **You are my Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased.** With Jesus, Nathanael would see the greatest the world has ever seen.

So this is the Son of Man Nathanael would follow—John and Andrew and Peter and Philip, too. And all of them would see these greater things. They would see a man who showed them his man-ness: he slept and ate and laughed and cried just as they did. But he also showed them his God-ness: he preached with power and healed the sick and raised the dead. They saw his compassion for people: he forgave sins, he removed guilt, he dried tears, They saw all of this again and again. they saw him die and they all fled except for one who stayed. And then they saw him alive and they all followed except for one who betrayed. And then they saw him ascend into heaven and they kept following him and so did millions more.

This is what you and I have seen. Nothing very spectacular. Worn out Bibles and Bible class notes. The inside of a church with readings and psalms and hymns and sermons. Water from a font, simple water, straight from the tap. Strange tasting bread and little sips of wine. But in the Word and water and bread and wine we have seen these greater things that Jesus promised. We have seen the heavens open, we have heard the voice of God, we have come to know the Son of Man. In that sight and sound and sense, Jesus has invited us to follow him. **Come to me,** he says, **and I will give you rest.** Come to me and I will forgive your sins. Come to me and I will be your strength. Come to me and I will take your hand, come to me and I will show you the way to heaven. Whenever Jesus speaks to us in Word and Sacrament, he is always calling us to follow him. Hear his voice; listen to his call. Follow him, stick with him, stay with him and you will see the greatest things of all! Amen.