

## 01.14.24 – Epiphany 2

### “Why Follow?”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

#### **Psalm 139 (NIV)**

*For the director of music. Of David. A psalm.*

- <sup>1</sup> You have searched me, Lord,  
and you know me.
- <sup>2</sup> You know when I sit and when I rise;  
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
- <sup>3</sup> You discern my going out and my lying down;  
you are familiar with all my ways.
- <sup>4</sup> Before a word is on my tongue  
you, Lord, know it completely.
- <sup>5</sup> You hem me in behind and before,  
and you lay your hand upon me.
- <sup>6</sup> Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,  
too lofty for me to attain.
- <sup>7</sup> Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?
- <sup>8</sup> If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
- <sup>9</sup> If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
- <sup>10</sup> even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.
- <sup>11</sup> If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me  
and the light become night around me,”
- <sup>12</sup> even the darkness will not be dark to you;  
the night will shine like the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.
- <sup>13</sup> For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
- <sup>14</sup> I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well.
- <sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you  
when I was made in the secret place,  
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
- <sup>16</sup> Your eyes saw my unformed body;  
all the days ordained for me were written in your book  
before one of them came to be.
- <sup>17</sup> How precious to me are your thoughts, God!  
How vast is the sum of them!
- <sup>18</sup> Were I to count them,

- they would outnumber the grains of sand—  
 when I awake, I am still with you.
- <sup>19</sup> If only you, God, would slay the wicked!  
 Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!
- <sup>20</sup> They speak of you with evil intent;  
 your adversaries misuse your name.
- <sup>21</sup> Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord,  
 and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?
- <sup>22</sup> I have nothing but hatred for them;  
 I count them my enemies.
- <sup>23</sup> Search me, God, and know my heart;  
 test me and know my anxious thoughts.
- <sup>24</sup> See if there is any offensive way in me,  
 and lead me in the way everlasting.

**Leader: These are the Words of David for God!**

All: Thanks be to God!

**John 1:43-51 (NLT)**

<sup>43</sup> The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Come, follow me.” <sup>44</sup> Philip was from Bethsaida, Andrew and Peter’s hometown.

<sup>45</sup> Philip went to look for Nathanael and told him, “We have found the very person Moses and the prophets wrote about! His name is Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

<sup>46</sup> “Nazareth!” exclaimed Nathanael. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” “Come and see for yourself,” Philip replied.

<sup>47</sup> As they approached, Jesus said, “Now here is a genuine son of Israel—a man of complete integrity.”

<sup>48</sup> “How do you know about me?” Nathanael asked.

Jesus replied, “I could see you under the fig tree before Philip found you.”

<sup>49</sup> Then Nathanael exclaimed, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God—the King of Israel!”

<sup>50</sup> Jesus asked him, “Do you believe this just because I told you I had seen you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than this.” <sup>51</sup> Then he said, “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.”

**Leader: These Words of Jesus Are of God.** All: Thanks be to God!

**Please pray with me:**

Omniscient God, you sent Jesus in human form to be our Savior, our leader, teacher, guide, conscience, hope, and joy of the world, knowing his future sacrifice. For this profound gift of salvation, we praise you in worship today through Scripture, prayer, music, and fellowship. May we sense our own Epiphany, hearing the call of Christ to follow him. Speak to us this morning in your Words and your voice through this servant messenger. Amen.

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Last week, when I asked what Epiphany is, we learned it was not only the Magi, but also the shepherds at his birth and the disciples perceiving Christ as the Son of God. That is our second passage when he calls Philip and Nathanael. Our first passage is a realization from David, who in 1043 BC was about to be made King, that he could not escape God's scrutiny about his person and his character. When this was written, David was hiding from Saul and gathering his warriors after taking Jerusalem. Its tone is both lamenting and confessional.

David writes that God is all knowing, always present, and all powerful, so he surrenders to his creator, realizing that it is impossible not to be intimately known by him. This has been one of my favorite psalms since I received God's calling to ministry, even though it is frightening to realize Creator God knows all we do or don't do; how we succeed or fail or commit sin, intentionally or unintentionally. Neither King David nor we can run from the Lord's presence in our lives, and that gives both comfort and a conscience.

The writer's language is personal yet figurative. It helps us understand our origins and the bond of the womb, mother, father, and God the Creator. This is remarkable because even before science revealed the details of conception and childbirth, David knew he was fearfully and wonderfully made in that secret place. His very existence depended upon the Lord God's grace and power. Don't you feel that way sometimes, especially at the birth of a great grand or grandchild? Or even when a loved one dies, and we review the wonder and accomplishments of their

lives, we have a small epiphany about God or have our own existence reaffirmed.

The second half of the poem dealt with his enemies, as he tried to reconcile his hatred of them with his love of God, and his desire to obey and follow his commandments. So, David begged God to slay his enemies for him while searching and improving his character, asking for forgiveness, and healing: “<sup>23</sup> Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. <sup>24</sup> See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting (Psalm 139:23-24).” David wants so desperately to be loyal to God. Those are good memory verses to pray for those who suffer anxiety or depression. That last prayer affirms David’s loyalty and faith in God; yet the first verses are his tangible behaviors, such as sitting, and rising, going to bed in Heaven or in Hell (he’s not sure because of his sinful past), or specific like the contrast of darkness and light. It’s an interesting choice of words and sequence, since we cannot see, taste, or smell faith. He builds his argument with facts, yet he acknowledges faith as God’s domain and *Kairos* timing. We define faith intangibly: “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see (Hebrews 11:1).” Perhaps that is what David really meant in this wonderful psalm that brings many aboard to follow Jesus.

For John the Baptist and his disciples, the epiphany was at Jesus’ baptism, when God’s voice declared: “<sup>16</sup> As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased (Matthew 3:16-17, John 1:14).” Here is John the Baptist’s testimony:

<sup>32</sup> Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. <sup>33</sup> And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ <sup>34</sup> I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.” (John 1:32-34)

After this, the first two disciples from Bethsaida were called to follow Christ: Andrew and Simon Peter. Not long after that and before Jesus traveled west to the region of Galilee, we have today’s passage, the calling of Philip and Nathanael. Philip was also from Bethsaida, a small village on the northeast shores of the Sea of Galilee. Philip recruited Nathanael to go with him. He was more skeptical, and only listened at first. He questioned Jesus’ credentials to be the Messiah they had heard so much about. How could he be so great if he came from Nazareth, such a small and insignificant town? Nathanael was casting an aspersion on the smallness of Nazareth, perhaps viewing it as a rival to his own little village of Beth-saida.

Jesus was only a carpenter in that rural village with small houses shared by multiple and extended families, small pens for sheep and chickens, with hillside tiny gardens for household produce (not like the huge farms of today). When we were in Nazareth Village (a historical recreation of Jesus’ boyhood community), where I took the photo on the bulletin cover, we learned that “carpenter” really meant stonemason and tool builder. They showed us authentic reproductions of tools like chisels, axes, tongs, and hammers. But when we think of carpenter, we think of saws, planes, and tools to work with wood, but there were very few trees in the deserts of Israel. Yes, there were a few, enough for firewood, so an ax was necessary, and of course furniture needed to be built, but much of

the furniture was made of boulders. In Jesus' Israel, especially where he grew up and later ministered (Samaria, Jericho, etc.) it was desert land with small mountains and cliffs made of rocks and clay, so the homes were more like the adobe homes of native Americans, and the tools had to be sturdier than wood to chisel the stones and rocks of the locale. In any case, the work Jesus was trained to do was heavy and dirty work, not academic or respectful. Nathanael's doubt was natural. Why follow a maker of tools? Later, he was known as Rabbi, and that made more sense to follow a teacher or an intellectual with powers to interpret the scrolls.

In the other Gospels or Acts, Nathanael's name is not mentioned as one of the twelve disciples, so scholars believe he represents believing Israel, not a specific man. This also makes sense because of Israel's wavering beliefs in Jesus vs. the temple authorities. Some scholars say he asked a normal question; it was neither positive affirmation of Jesus nor negative doubt. For many who are called by God there is a tentative questioning to be sure of their discernment and direction, so it makes sense that Nathanael either a person or Israel as a state asks "wait, he's from Nazareth? Yet Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah all said he would come to save the world?" So why follow? He follows when Jesus says he saw him studying the Torah under the fig tree; more importantly, when the savior calls you by name and by purpose, there is no more doubt. It is sure, and your anointing is clear. Nathanael then had his own epiphany realizing Jesus was not only Rabbi, but the Son of God. That was reason enough to follow him!

The last section connects prophecy and fulfillment; according to an Intervarsity Press commentary, Jesus, the one who has divine knowledge

and authority makes an astounding “claim: ‘*I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man* (v. 51).’ Jesus is speaking to Nathanael, but the verbs he uses are in the plural, so this is intended for the rest of the disciples.” And since we too are Christ’s disciples I ask the question again, “Why Follow?” Is Jesus your savior? If not, why not? Can we follow in his footsteps? Of course not, but we can try by using his example of love, grace, justice, and mercy. It is appropriate that the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service is tomorrow. I hope you’ll re-evaluate how you serve the world to increase its awareness of Jesus. As a church, we are doing that very thing, and invite you to find beauty in everything as we take on new missions. Start pondering as more will be revealed as we go along. Next week is our first sermon from Genesis; I hope you’ll join us in finding beauty in many ways. Amen. || *Let us pray.*

Omnipresent and always loving God, we thank you for sending your Son, Jesus. We ask for your help to be like Nathanael, asking questions, yet surrendering to you. We ask you to be more like David’s last prayer lines, being open to your examination, yet trusting and obedient. Help us to seek new disciples to invite along on our church’s journey this year and forever, as we share our faith and your assurance with others we serve. It is in your Son, Jesus’ name we pray, **Amen.**