

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

The season of Epiphany, which began January 6th with the theophany of the star leading the wise men to the infant Jesus, followed by the baptism of Jesus with the theophany of the voice from heaven and the descent of the Holy Spirit as a dove upon Jesus, continues today in a bit less dramatic fashion, but manifestations of the Divine are certainly observable in today's Scripture texts in the calling of the prophet Samuel and then Philip and Nathanael.

Indeed, in our Old Testament reading, the very voice of the Lord was heard by Samuel as he was serving at the house of the Lord located in Shiloh at this time. You may recall how Samuel, who was the answer to Hannah's prayer to the Lord, had been "*lent ... to the LORD*" (1 Sam. 1:28) in accordance with her promise to "*give him to the LORD all the days of his life*" (1 Sam. 1:11). While serving, Samuel heard the Lord call to him three times before the priest Eli realized that it was the Lord Himself calling Samuel. Eli instructed Samuel how to respond should the Lord call again, and so he did as the Lord called a fourth time and even stood before Samuel — surely this is none other than a theophany of the preincarnate Son of God Himself.

Moving to the New Testament, you'll recall that I mentioned last week that the theophany that John the Baptist witnessed was the sight that caused John to know that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, so that, John proclaimed Him to be the "*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29).

But not every theophany is so overt. In our Gospel text today, Philip was called first to follow Jesus, and Philip didn't have the benefit of the theophany seen by John. What was it that caused Philip to follow after Jesus' call, we might wonder? Let me assert it was the Holy Spirit working in His more ordinary way—through the spoken and written word of God.

I think it's probably safe to say that Philip had heard a bit about Jesus already. The day before—for you'll notice our text begins "*the next day*" pointing us to look at what happened the day before—the day before, two of John the Baptist's disciples heard John proclaim Jesus to be "*the Lamb of God*" (John 1:36). We know that one of those disciples was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, and the other was obviously not Peter himself, for Andrew later went to find Peter and tell him about Jesus, whom Andrew would proclaim to be the Messiah, the long-awaited, anointed King of Israel.

Who the other disciple was is a bit of a mystery for he is unnamed, but one of the possibilities — and I think a good one — is that the other disciple of John was Philip, a fellow citizen of Bethsaida with Andrew. Moreover, having spent the rest of the day with Jesus, these two no doubt would have learned much about who

Jesus was—enough for Andrew excitedly to tell Peter, “*We have found the Messiah*” (John 1:41). If Philip was that other disciple, it makes sense, then, that the next day, Jesus would seek out Philip to invite him to “*Follow me!*” Moreover, it makes sense that Philip would have thought hard enough about the Messiah to be able to proclaim to Nathanael, “*We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote*”

Which brings us to the call of Nathanael. Now, unlike Philip, Nathanael didn’t hear an immediate call by Jesus to “follow Him.” Philip issued the call, “*Come and see.*” And at Philip’s invitation to “check this Jesus out,” Nathanael indeed went.

And here comes another theophany, one that convinces Nathanael that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, the King of Israel, for Jesus looked into Nathanael’s heart and saw “*an Israelite indeed,*” an Israelite seeking the truth, an Israelite who knew the promises made to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob told by the pen of Moses, promises made to David told by the prophets. Nathanael was an Israelite who was looking for the coming of the Messiah.

“*How do you know me?*” skeptical Nathanael asked Jesus (remember, he’s the one who asked, “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*”). And Jesus answered, “*Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.*”

That manifestation of Divine power was enough to convince Nathanael that this Jesus from Nazareth was indeed something good, someone special, that He had uncommon abilities, that He was the Messiah long-promised. It may not have been significant enough for the Evangelist John to call it a “*sign*” that “*manifested [Jesus’] glory*” (John 2:11), like a few days later at the wedding at Cana when Jesus turned water into wine, but it was enough for Nathanael. He called Jesus “*Rabbi,*” that is, I want to follow you, too. I want to learn from you. I want to be your disciple. He called Jesus, “*the Son of God*” and the “*King of Israel!*”

Jesus responded to Nathanael’s confession with a promise and a warning — at least, that’s how I see it. “*Greater things than these you will see,*” Jesus told him. And consider what Nathanael would see in the three years of Jesus’ ministry: more Divine power on display, feeding the multitudes, stilling the storms, healing the blind, the deaf, the lame, casting out demons, forgiving sins, raising from the dead.

But the greatest of all would be when he would see the “*heaven[s] opened,*” by the Son of Man, and in His heavenly glory “*the angels of God ascending and descending*” upon Him. And this is also the warning, for this would require the Son of Man to be lifted up on the ladder of the cross. Heaven would not be opened up without suffering and death, without blood shed and a last breath of air breathed out, for this is what it would take for the Son of Man to atone for the sins of the

world. The cross was the climax of our redemption—indeed Nathanael would see the greatest event of all history!

What Nathanael and the disciples saw, they have borne witness to—that we might also believe in Jesus and follow after Him as His disciples. For there is another calling in view today — our own. And this has taken a theophany, too, a manifestation of the Divine Holy Spirit, for we cannot call Jesus Lord by our own reason or strength. We cannot believe in Jesus or come to Him except by the Holy Spirit. He calls us not because we got to witness the spectacle of Jesus’ death or resurrection, but because Nathanael did, and Philip, and John, and they bore witness. And so the Holy Spirit calls us by that good news that they proclaim, bearing to us the fruits of Jesus’ death and resurrection—calling us by water, as we are united with Jesus in a death like His that we might be united with Him in a resurrection like His; sanctifying and keeping us as Jesus’ followers with bread and wine, receiving by these instruments, the living body and blood of Him who, hanging on that ladder, gave Himself up for the world, and who rose victorious over death and the grave.

These may not be the only ways that God makes His presence known in our lives. If we have eyes to see, we can recognize His work in little miracles that happen to us throughout our lives. We can give thanks to God for these. But the ordinary way that God works among us, calling us to faith and keeping us in that faith, is through these humble means of grace.

Lord, grant us eyes to see You at work in our lives through Your word and sacraments—calling, gathering, enlightening, and sanctifying us. Through these, keep us steadfast in the true faith —see in our hearts true Israelites in whom there is no deceit — so that we might, with Nathanael and all true disciples, enter into the heavens opened for us by You and see “[Your] angels ... ascending and descending on the Son of Man,” Jesus Christ, our Lord, as we are gathered around His eternal throne.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.