

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

What does it take to believe in Jesus? Certainly, we confess with Luther, “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith” (Small Catechism, 3rd Article Apostles’ Creed). We also confess in the Augsburg Confession, “So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given [John 20:22]. He works faith, when and where it pleases God [John 3:8], in those who hear the good news that God justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ’s sake” (AC V:1-3).

Some skeptics find fault with Christianity, at least with some Christians, saying, “You don’t really believe the Bible. That’s why you people say, ‘I know God is real because He healed my child’ ... ‘I know God is real because, when I was down on my luck, God supplied me with an unexpected check’ ... ‘I know God is real because, when my life seemed so aimless, I prayed to God and He gave me direction.’ You Christians only believe in God because of something you interpret as a miracle” — when we’ve had an epiphany.”

Of course, the inartful way these Christians express themselves fuels these critics, but recognizing miracles as such is only confirmation of a faith already in existence, unless they think that these Christians prayed like George Bailey in *It’s a Wonderful Life*. In dire straits in the movie, George prayed, “Dear Father in heaven, I’m not a praying man but if you’re up there and you can hear me show me the way. I’m at the end of my rope. Show me the way.” That’s not the prayer of a faithful Christian. No, I suggest that those Christians mentioned above came to believe, as we confess, by the Spirit’s working through the Gospel, and then in time of trouble their epiphanies confirmed their faith.

For remember, Peter says, “*we have something more sure*” — more sure than the epiphany of watching Jesus be transfigured before them and hearing the voice from heaven speak wondrous words, “*This is my beloved Son*” (2 Pet. 1:16-18). We have “*the prophetic word,*” he says, “*to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place*” (2 Pet. 1:19).

Now, of course, we have an advantage that the earliest followers of Christ did not have. We have the New Testament. We have the testimony of the Evangelists and the Apostles. Not so for those early disciples of Jesus. They had only the Old Testament. They had only Moses and the Prophets ... completely sufficient for faith, by the way. Remember what Luke records ... how Jesus said to the Emmaus disciples after His resurrection: “*O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all*

that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:25-27)? The Old Testament is enough, but it’s nice to have the New also.

Nathanael, however, did not have it. He had only Moses and the Prophets, so when Phillip sought him out and told him the wondrous news: *“We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote”*; *“We have found the Messiah”* (which means Christ) (John 1:41); He is *“Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph”*; it is little wonder that *“Nathanael said [back] to [Phillip], ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’”* Where is the verse that says the Messiah will come from Nazareth? Even the chief priests and scribes that Herod assembled knew that the One *“born king of the Jews”* would come from Bethlehem, not Nazareth (Matt. 2:4-5). We just don’t know what verses Matthew is referring to when he says that the prophets foretold that the Messiah *“would be called a Nazarene”* (Matt. 2:23).

But that didn’t make Nathanael an unbeliever. No, Jesus affirms it. Truly, he was *“an Israelite ... in whom there is no deceit!”* He was a believer, looking for Messiah to come. He was looking to Moses and the Prophets to show him the Messiah. It was just this Nazareth thing. That’s why he didn’t think it could be Jesus.

For Nathanael, it took an epiphany, not to believe, but to identify Jesus as the Messiah foretold by Moses and the Prophets. It took an epiphany to identify Jesus as *“the King of Israel,”* as *“the Son of God.”* It was a little thing, but it was convincing to Nathanael. *“How do you know me?”* Nathanael asked. *“Jesus answered him, ‘Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.’”* Without access to the New Testament, this epiphany confirmed it. Jesus was the Christ foretold by Moses and the prophets.

More exciting, though, was what Jesus said next, first to Nathanael and then to you all! First, Jesus told Nathanael that he would see more and greater epiphanies than this little demonstration: *“Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these”* — and so Nathanael did as he followed Jesus. He saw epiphanies galore: thousands fed, the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, the mute speaking, the lame walking, lepers cleansed, demons cast out, the dead raised up to life, not to mention stilling storms and walking on water.

But then Jesus said this to Nathanael, speaking about you plural, not just Nathanael. *“Truly, truly, I say to you all, you all will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”* Our own Bill Weinrich writes, “Jesus, as though turning to the audience of all the future faithful,

promises this seeing to all members of the new Israel, all who share the faith of Nathanael” (Weinrich, *Concordia Commentary: John 1:1–7:1*, 290). He promises this seeing to us.

Now, everyone agrees that Jesus has Jacob’s vision in view here, of a ladder extending from earth up to heaven with angels ascending and descending on it (Gen. 28:12-13). But there are differences. Rather than the Lord at the top of the ladder, far off in heaven, the heavens have been opened, the Lord has descended down to earth and dwells with man in the person of the Son of Man. As the Word came down from heaven and became flesh, He brought heaven down to earth with Him. The angels are ascending and descending on Him.

This great epiphany of “the vision of Jn 1:51,” though, is, according to Weinrich, more than “of the divine Word ... in the humility of his incarnation.” It is also “in his suffering for the life of the world” (Weinrich, 293). The great epiphany we are all now privileged to behold is the Son of Man hanging on a tree, sacrificed for sinners. As we sing to Christ, the Son of the everlasting Father, in the *Te Deum*, “when You had overcome the sharpness of death, You opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.”

This great epiphany is painted for us now in Word and Sacraments. We do see the Son of Man precisely in His flesh, on that tree, in our baptisms into His body and our baptisms into His death, in our proclamation of the mortal Christ crucified to grant us immortality, in our eating and drinking of the flesh and blood that proclaims His death until He comes. These are the Gospel instruments through which the Holy Spirit works faith in us as we hear the good news that Christ has forgiven us by His blood and gives us life.

Of course, there may be other ways that the living God makes His presence known in our lives. If we have eyes to see, we can recognize His work, too, in little miracles that happen to us throughout our lives, and 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 not only through extraordinary epiphanies, but especially through the ordinary ones, through Your word and sacraments — calling, gathering, enlightening, and sanctifying us. Through these, keep us steadfast in the true faith. Make us Israelites in whom there is no deceit, so that, gathered in Christ’s church, we might recognize that we have heaven on earth with the Son of Man, and we might join with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven at His holy altar, “*ascending and descending on the Son of Man.*”

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