

19 January 2003
The Second Sunday after Epiphany

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“His Mission: Our Confession”

Text: John 1:43-51

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Evangelism is hard work! Just ask Philip. Imagine how excited he was after Jesus had found him and told him to **“Follow Me.”** How full of – and bursting with – hope and joy as he went to Nathanael! Filled with good news! **“We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”**

Nathanael, the prophet is here! The Saviour, the Redeemer! Come on! Come and see and be excited with me! . . . But what is Nathanael’s response? **“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”** Talk about bursting your bubble! Evangelism is hard work. Nathanael eventually goes with Philip at his invitation, Mark reports. But I wonder how much convincing it took? I wonder how long Philip was there, talking with Nathanael, explaining to Nathanael, and trying to convince him? Mark simply records the facts, but I wonder . . . I wonder what it took to finally get Nathanael to go with him, to **“Come and see”**? Evangelism is hard work.

And isn’t that how it is with us in our day and age today? Perhaps you have felt like Philip, for you know your Saviour Jesus Christ! He has come to you and given you the gift of faith and told you to **“Follow Me.”** And so perhaps excited about your Church, about your faith, about your Lord, you have spoken to someone else about Him. You were full of good news of sins forgiven, and acceptance, and love and mercy, and hope. But then what was your excitement met with? I’ll bet it was something like Nathanael, wasn’t it? Doubt. Questions. A lukewarm response. Skepticism. Whatever! Yeah, maybe. Evangelism is hard work.

But before we condemn this lukewarm, indifferent attitude in others, perhaps we need to look at ourselves first, and how we often receive the message of God’s Word and His Good News of forgiveness and love. Is it not also . . . sometimes . . . often times, with the same “eagerness” and “excitement” that we often see in others? For how often do we hear God’s Word but fail to take it to heart? Because there are just some things in our hearts and lives that we don’t want to let go of! . . . How often do we hear God’s Word but apply it to others instead of ourselves? . . . And don’t we still sometimes have doubts

and nagging questions? Not that we want them, but don't they sometimes pop up in our minds? . . . Don't we also get our priorities mixed up? And make wrong choices? And have regrets? . . . Isn't that reluctant, lukewarm, "whatever" attitude sometimes "alive and well" in us too? That old, sinful man in us asserting himself . . . Evangelism is hard work, but not only in others – even in us!

And so the Holy Spirit has His work cut out for Him, doesn't He? For He is the only true evangelist. As hard as you and I might try, as eloquently as we might be able to speak, as much as we may study and be able to refute all the arguments of the world, we cannot convince a single person to believe. Not one. We can't even convince ourselves. Philip couldn't do it, and I can't, and you can't either. Only the Holy Spirit can convert a person, through the Word of Christ. Only the Holy Spirit is powerful enough to penetrate cold, stony, unwilling, sinful hearts. Only the Holy Spirit can give the gift of faith. And the Holy Spirit, working through the Word of God, does His work. All of us here today are evidence of that fact.

And this work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, is one of the themes of the Epiphany season that we are now in. For in Epiphany, not only is Jesus revealed to us as the Son of God, but His mission is also revealed to us. His mission for us and for our salvation. His mission to reconcile and bring back together again God and man. His mission work of atonement for sin by ascending the cross to die in our place. That is why the Son of God came. That is His work, His mission. A mission **begun** before the creation of the world, **accomplished** in His incarnation and His death and resurrection for us, and still being **continued** among us today. . . . And it is His mission. I think that sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking that OK, God did His part, now its our turn. We have to do our part. Its up to us now. . . . But its not up to us now. It never was. Its His mission. Done by Him, in His time, in His way, and with His means. Does He use us, as members of His body, His Church, today, to carry out His mission? Absolutely! But that doesn't make it ours! Its still His mission, and He is still the only one who can accomplish it.

And so we heard of that mission today. First in the Old Testament reading from First Samuel. We heard that at that time, "*the Word of the Lord was rare.*" Why? We don't know. But it was according to God's plan, and God decided when to break that silence and come and speak to Samuel. His mission, His time, His means. *Using Eli* to lead Samuel to know the Lord. . . . And then we heard about the Corinthians in the Epistle reading. Horrible people, those Corinthians! With every problem and sin and vice you could think of among them! Specifically today we heard of some of their sexual problems – which sounds very much like our day and age today. And perhaps we may wonder why God is bothering with these people, who obviously aren't very interested in

Him! Why is Paul spending so much time with them, and writing to them, and trying to convince them? Wouldn't his time be better spent somewhere else? To get a better return on investment? A bigger bang for the buck? But it is God's mission, not Paul's; and His time, His means, His work.

And still today. How is God working in the world, among us, today? Perhaps it is in ways that we can see and identify, but also, we must admit, it is in ways of which we have no idea. And so while yes, Christ has given His Church certain and definite means by which He works – His Word and Sacraments – and we use those means and rely on them! But **how** He works through them is not up to us. His mission, His time. And it may take a long time – longer than we might have been hoping for! Or perhaps He will open His flood gates. But it is His mission. For consider Nathanael again. ***“How do you know me?”*** he asks Jesus. ***“I saw you,”*** Jesus says, ***“under the fig tree, even before Philip called you.”*** Before we even get there, God sees, He knows, He is working. When you thought you were alone, Nathanael, you weren't alone.

And you are not alone. And do you realize what a wonderful statement that is? Technology has created a revolution in our day and age, and solved so many problems, and people today have computers, and TVs, and PDAs, and cell phones, and beepers, and satellite gizmos, and we communicate more than ever before! But people somehow are also lonelier than ever before. And we can feel trapped in our aloneness – that I am *alone* in the world, *alone* with my sin, *alone* and on my own. . . . But you are not alone. There is a gracious plan of God at work for you, even when you do not know it, even when it seems as if the forces of evil have the upper hand in our world and are bringing down our world in godlessness and apostasy and rebellion! No, remember Nathanael. ***“How do you know me?”*** Do you think God does not see? He sees. He knows. And even though we think there must be a better way, for geesh, we would certainly be doing things differently! No, it is His mission. His work, His time, His means. To lead us to know Him and to confess His Name, as Nathanael did: ***“Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”*** And this God is leading us to do, as the Spirit through the Word continues His work in us, and evangelizes us, and convicts us, and converts us. Or as the explanation to the Creed states, as He *“calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies us.”*

And by the Spirit's work in us, we see the “greater things” spoken of by Jesus to Nathanael, when Jesus said, ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”*** That's an Old Testament picture of Jesus. For “Jacob's ladder” is not something for us to climb and get ourselves into Heaven, it is Jesus Himself, the Son of God come down to us. Jesus is the bridge between Heaven and earth. Jesus is Heaven come down to earth. And by faith, we see Jesus, and know Him as He is. We know Him as He descends to us in His Word

of life and we hear His Word: “*You are not alone with your sin; I forgive you all your sins.*” We know Him as He descends to us in His water of life and cleansing and we hear His promise: “*You are not alone in this world; I have adopted you, you are mine.*” And we know Him as He descends to us in His true body and blood of communion and we hear His invitation: “*Take and eat, this is My body; take and drink, this is My blood, given and shed for you. You are not alone and on your own; I am with you wherever you go.*” And His mission is worked in you and me. And not just once, but continually, as we are evangelized – *given the Gospel*, in these means – and are led, like Nathanael, to confess the Name of our Saviour. The One who has done all of this . . . for **ME**. We confess His Name, not only here, but in our lives, in our vocations, in the world.

We confess. That is evangelism. That is Christ’s mission. That we confess His Name, both now and forever in eternal life. That we speak simply what we have heard; His Word of forgiveness, life, and presence. And as we do, the Spirit works through that confession. . . . **We confess.** That is what we do as Christians. What we believe and what we do are not two different things – but one and the same. We confess what we have heard and seen, just like the Christmas shepherds. . . . **We confess.** We do not keep silent, for the Word is our only weapon. Satan doesn’t fear us, but He does fear the Word of God. “*One little Word can fell him.*” . . . **We confess.** For the same Word that speaks to our hearts, and the sin, the doubts, the fears, the worry, the anxiety, and the questions that are in us – that same Word also speaks to others, and is exactly what they need. . . . **We confess.** That is Christ’s mission – that we confess His Name. And through that confession He will carry out His mission, in His time, in His way, with His means. . . . Just ask *Nathanael!*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen