

John 1:43-51: The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

Jesus begins his ministry by inviting people to join him and follow him.

It seems so effortless. Jesus finds Phillip and Phillip goes and finds Nathaniel. Nathaniel goes from being a skeptic to a full-on convert in 3.1 seconds! Okay not quite that fast — but from “*Can anything good come from Nazareth?*” to “*Truly you are the son of God!*” in a very short period of time. And then they carry on like a snowball in perfect packing snow conditions — they just seem to pick up disciples and followers as they go along. Of course, it used to be effortless for us too. So effortless we didn't used to have to invite anyone. People were born into the church. You were born Catholic or United Church or Presbyterian or whatever it was you were. But now, within two or three generations, everything has changed. Nothing about following Jesus is effortless anymore.

I heard a story that spoke to this huge change from a minister friend, Ross Lockhart, who used to be a UCC minister in this area and preached here for an anniversary service many years ago. He is now a professor at a theological school in Vancouver. Ross shared this story about Christianity and the generational divide that exists today. Let me read his words: “It was Maundy Thursday [the day before Good Friday] and I was nestled into a pew as my 5-year-old daughter drove her Transformer toy all over the hymnbooks and caused general mayhem before the program started. I was in church during Holy Week but not for worship. I sat in St. Anselm's Anglican Church on The University of British Columbia (UBC) campus waiting for the performance of my 13-year-old daughter and others who had participated all week in a UBC drama camp. Now, the camp simply rented space at the local Anglican church — nothing more, nothing less. And as I waited for the performance to begin I did what I usually do in public spaces, I eavesdropped shamelessly. The family in the pew behind me, eager to see their own daughter/granddaughter perform, shared this little gem of a conversation with me:

Boomer Grandfather (roughly late 60's): "Wow, I can't believe I didn't get hit by lightning coming into this place!" (His wife cackles loudly.) "Who knows, maybe I'll still burst into flames at some point...." Adult Gen X Daughter (mid 40's) in a more reflective tone: "Dad,

didn't we used to go to church like at Christmas and Easter and stuff? I seem to remember being in a church like this when I was little — is that right?" Boomer Grandfather: "Well, yeah, that was a long time ago and I can't remember the last time I was in a church. Most of us figured out that you don't need to come to a place like this to be a good person." Adult Gen X Daughter: "Well Dad, do you know what your granddaughter said when I dropped her off here at camp on the first day? She said, 'Mummy, what is this place? I've never been inside a place like this before. What do they do here?' The woman paused and continued in a quieter voice, 'It was weird - I didn't know what to say. And I felt ashamed.'"

This fascinating cross-generational witness of the end of Christendom was interrupted by the millennial-aged drama camp instructor who welcomed us to the performance and noted (in usual west coast fashion) that we were meeting on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Musqueam peoples. No word was given, of course, that we were also meeting in a sacred space of Christian worship."

Ross says he left the performance wondering about how we share our faith with the different generations. Like the Boomers who grew up in the church but mostly left it ... many with a lot of baggage around it. Or the Gen X's like me who may or may not have gone to church but had enough cultural and institutional knowledge of church to have an idea of what goes on inside. And then the Millennials and even more the Gen Z — most of whom like the granddaughter had never set foot in a church and had no idea what went on in a building like that. Don't get me wrong — I'm not someone who thinks we need to go back the "good 'ol days" when we said the Lord's prayer in school. For one, that ship has sailed and lamenting it is not going to help us. For another, I'm not sure the Christians of Christendom were always people with a living and transformative faith. Having a real faith that changes you is different from cultural observances.

Because I grew up in a church that didn't need to invite people in, I'm not very good at it now. In general, we are not very good at it. Not only did we not *need* to invite people in before, it was seen as offensive. (You've got your church and I've got mine!) But this is the age of Gen Z. (My children are all Gen Z, though by some definitions my youngest is Generation Alpha). Young people today have no idea what a church is, let alone have any understanding of who Jesus is and what it is to be a Christian. We have to learn how to invite people in, or the Christian Church (in Canada anyway) will die within the next 50 years. Why would we invite? Is it so we can imagine this Wall Street Church still here long after we are? Maybe partly, but there's a better reason.

Jesus didn't invite Phillip to join a church or a new religion. Neither did Phillip. Notice that when Phillip excitedly shares good news with Nathaniel — "*We have found the one whom Moses and the Prophets were talking about*"— and Nathaniel puts up a wall and says, "Nazareth? Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Phillip doesn't argue with him and give him 10 reasons why Nazareth is not so bad; he simply says to him "Come and see for yourself." As Philip Yancey has said, no one has become a

Christian because they lost the argument. You're not going to debate anyone into a life of faith. Jesus invited Phillip to follow him — to get to know him. He invited him into a **relationship**, not a belief system, not a club, not an institution. Philip must have experienced hope and life because he goes and finds his friend Nathaniel and says "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus — son of Joseph from Nazareth!" And Philip invites Nathaniel to come and see. The invitation is to relationship. And not just any relationship, but a **relationship that changes you**.

I was listening to the radio earlier this week. On CBC's the Current, the host was interviewing Dr. Peter Attia. They were talking about living longer and living healthy. I think the segment started off talking about how great saunas are, but then moved on to living longer and healthier lives — that whole idea that most of us don't want to live a long life unless that life is a reasonably healthy life. Dr. Attia and the host brought up the fact that for the first time in an insanely long time *the average life expectancy has gone down*. Now I should say that Dr. Attia was from the U.S. and wasn't 100% sure it was the same in Canada, but he was pretty sure it would be similar. He said you have to take Covid out of the life expectancy equation because it is a specific global event where a whole lot of people have died, but this trend was being seen before Covid and is continuing after. The thing that caught my attention was the question "Why is life expectancy shortening?" What Doctor Attia said was "Deaths of despair have increased." I had never heard that term *deaths of despair*. He went on to define it: drug overdose, suicide, the increase of alcohol-related deaths and the increase in loneliness. People are literally dying because they have lost hope, purpose, and meaning, and have few or no meaningful connections.

Disconnection is a major problem in our society now. Covid was a major driver of that, and it affected children and teens in times of critical milestone periods. The online digital world is part of it too. Some connections can happen online, but they can never completely replace the real thing. Invitation to deeper connection, **invitation to relationships with other people on a journey and a relationship with Jesus** is still a core piece of what we are called to do. In an increasingly online world and with new generations, we need to learn new ways to invite and new ways to connect with people. The digital and online world will continue to be very important. But at the heart of what we need is simply an invitation into a life-changing relationship.

People desperately need meaningful connections. They need connections with people. As someone who has followed Jesus on a life journey, I can tell you that people need life that comes with following Jesus. A relationship with Jesus changes you. Do you know the number one reason people stop going to church? **They move**. (from Ryan Burge, American Political Scientist and statistician with an interest in religious trends). That's it. They don't stop believing, they don't get fed up — they move. They had connections at their previous church, they move and become disconnected. Do you know the number one reason people come to church? They are invited by a friend. It's not the great preaching, it's not the great band: it's simply because someone they knew invited them.

When he approaches, Jesus says to Nathanael: “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” And Nathanael says “How do you know? Where did you get to know me?” And Jesus replies “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” And Nathanael’s mind is completely blown! He had been praying, alone. So this is not just, “Oh, I noticed you in line at the Tim Horton’s!” There is something deeper in this exchange. In an instant, Nathanael pivots from skeptic — “Who’s this guy from Nazareth?” — to total believer. “*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! The King of Israel!*” That is no small claim. For a devout Jew to proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God, the King of Israel — that’s huge! Jesus then says “*Do you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these. Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.*” In other words, Jesus is saying that He is the key to the connection between heaven and earth. Jesus is the revelation and the surest link to heaven.

There are debates about what this means, and I’ve heard a couple of credible theories. One I heard recently that I liked was that it could well be a link to the very beginning of Genesis. There are three trees in the garden of Eden in that story of creation. That story where in the beginning the connections are perfect: the connections of humans to each other, the connection of humans to creation, the connection of humans to God, where they walk and talk freely with God. And then comes the Fall after the apple is eaten — and the disconnect begins.

There are three named trees in the garden. The tree of life, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (where the apple came from) and then the fig tree — the tree that Adam and Eve hid under after they ate the apple. The tree whose leaves they used to clothe themselves and cover up the shame of their nakedness that had never been shameful before. Jesus says to Nathaniel, ‘*Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!*’ Nathanael asked him, ‘*Where did you come to know me?*’ Jesus answered, ‘*I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.*’ Maybe Jesus was saying to Nathaniel: “I see you. I see the real you, the you that you want to hide, the you that you’re ashamed of, and I see no deceit. I see what you see as flaws, but I love you. You are flawless to me.” That kind of relationship changes you and fills you. It heals you and makes you want to cry out: ‘*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!*’

Jesus promises to connect Nathaniel more and more deeply to heaven and to earth, to God and to others on the journey. I pray that you will seek God with all your heart and all your mind. The amazing thing is that when you do, you will discover that *it is God who has been seeking you all along!* I pray that, like Nathanael, you will taste and experience the transforming power of a relationship with Jesus, and I pray that you will share it with others. Invite them to come and see, and to come and be seen.

Thanks be to God. Amen.