

St. Paul A.M.E. Church

Bible Study

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All Things New

January Theme: A New Beginning

A New Word

We can sometimes be limited in our expectations of New Beginnings because of what we have heard about a person, place or a thing. We may need to take a fresh look at what we may have thought was well known and familiar. God often reveals new things to us and initiates new beginnings for us from unexpected places.

A New Understanding

The theme of John's Gospel is that God had taken human form in the person of Jesus Christ. For this reason John's Gospel is often seen as the most evangelistic of the four Gospels. John's emphasis on the nature of Christ—as opposed to the more chronological, historical accounts of Jesus' life in Matthew, Mark, and Luke—has fostered the popular classification of Matthew, Mark, and Luke as “Synoptic” Gospels. This means they put forth a similar view and emphasis, while the Gospel of John falls into a class all to itself.

The purpose of John's Gospel is not a question for speculation. It contains the most clearly stated purpose statement in all of Scripture: “That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:31). The key word here is “believe,” found in John close to one hundred times. This gives the Gospel two primary purposes. First, John's Gospel sought to confront individuals with the life and claims of Christ in order that they might surrender their lives to Christ's rule. Therefore the first purpose of John's Gospel is evangelistic. Second, it is possible to translate “may believe” in John's purpose statement as “may continue to believe,” which would intimate the purpose of not only winning individuals to faith in Christ but also that of strengthening the family of faith that is already walking with Christ.

John 1:43–50 (NIV)

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴ Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” ⁴⁶ “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked. “Come and see,” said Philip. ⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” ⁴⁸ “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.” ⁴⁹ Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.” ⁵⁰ Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.”

The Old in the Text

1. Philip, Andrew and Peter are all from Bethsaida and Nathanael is from Cana. Both Cana and Bethsaida are small towns in the region of Galilee. How might Nathanael's small town origins have caused him to have low expectations of someone from a small village like Nazareth? (v. 46)

2. Philip also mentions that Jesus is the son of Joseph (v. 46). How might Jesus' parentage have influenced how Nathanael responded?

The New in the Text

1. Philip seemed undaunted by Nathanael's question but responded with the enthusiastic "Come and see." Why do you think Philip was not discouraged by Nathanael's honest question? Why was Philip's response perfect?
2. What quality in Nathanael does Jesus seem to lift up in verse 47? Why is this quality helpful for persons who would be disciples of Christ?
3. Nathanael believed in Jesus because Jesus told him he saw him while he was "still under the fig tree." Can you think of the positives and negatives regarding that source of belief?

A New Look

Jesus calls us, too, to join him and walk in Nathanael's footsteps. To do that, you'll need to take a step toward Jesus. This kind of faith-walk is a journey into an uncertain future, but it is one that trusts Jesus to be leading us in the right direction. Membership in the disciples who follow Jesus is seen when ...

- People take the time to observe the Sabbath, a day for praying and playing. Philosopher Norman Wirzba says that Sabbath-keeping is all about trust in God, rest and gratitude for what we have been given. The Sabbath is a day for "celebrating the many gifts — sunshine, water, soil, earthworms, wheat, chickens, family, neighbors — that make our living possible and a joy."
- Churches show a commitment and desire to meet the needs of the community, without worrying about money. St. John Presbyterian Church, located in a largely Hispanic community in Tampa, Florida, operates one of the largest medical clinics in the Southeast, and provides a special "Sunshine Class" for women with mental retardation. The church has only about 130 members, none of them wealthy, but they have a rich commitment to mission.
- Communities put their energy into doing what Jesus instructed his followers to do. According to writer Anne Lamott on beliefnet.com, this means that we "care for the weakest, the least of his people, which includes prisoners and the poorest of the poor and the oldest and most exhausted."

A New Conversation

1. What does observing the Sabbath have to do with being a follower of Jesus?
2. What would a New Beginning look like for St. Paul and our relationship to the community?
3. Who might be the "weakest" and the "least" that our church could do a better job of reaching?

A New Walk

1. When have you exhibited the skepticism of Nathanael? Were you honest about it or did you hide it?
2. Where are some areas of your life that you may be overlooking what God is doing because of your expectations?
3. What New Beginning would you like God to do in your life as a follower of Christ?