

**John 1: 43 - 51**

**Second Sunday after the Epiphany, B**

**January 14, 2024**

**The Rev. Katherine Bush**

A week ago Friday, my social feeds started to fill up with pictures of parishioners carefully spreading this dramatic white fabric across all the pews and then pictures of our friend Fireman Pete who comes every year with his giant ladder ready to ascend and descend time and time again to install this glorious and tragic work of art. And this year, there were new pictures of the light dappling the beautiful newly golden floors, now glowing in previously unknown ways. And unbidden, a line of poetry floated up into mind: "Glory be to God for dappled things." Thank you, English teachers, who insisted upon memorization. And thank you, Gerard Manly Hopkins, for "Pied Beauty." You probably didn't foresee that your words would rise up into the mind of a woman serving as a priest in a southern, American city when she witnessed the raising of a physical testament to the complicated beauty and heartache of living in the time of AIDS.

There are any number of reasons this might all seem strange to Hopkins. Starting with the fact that we are reading his poetry. None of his poems were published in his lifetime. He burned many if not most of them, and the ones we have were published more than thirty years after his death by one of his close friends. Also, Hopkins was a Roman Catholic Jesuit priest and probably didn't see me coming. And intriguingly, some scholars speculate, based on his letters, that he might have been a closeted gay man. So who can presume to know what he might have thought about a world and particularly a church that is trying its best to be a home and a solace to the LGBTQ communities and to recognize the pain of a one-time dreadfully misunderstood disease? A mystery for sure. Hopkins contained multitudes: for the second half of his short forty-four years, Hopkins was estranged from his family because he decided to leave the English Anglican church to become a Jesuit and ultimately a priest. He suffered bouts of deep physical weariness and depression - described as melancholy in his Victorian time. Yet, many of his poems speak exuberantly to the beauty and splendor of God's world.

"Glory be to God for dappled things," his poem begins and then over ten brief lines, celebrates the wide and wild diversity of all the things he can see in God's creation: couple-colored skies, stippled trout, finches wings, the variety of landscapes and the array of trades, "all things counter, original, spare, strange; / Whatever is fickle, freckled ... / swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim; / he fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: / Praise him." Hopkins praises God for all that is dappled and different and diverse; he whose difficult life might have produced despairing, cynical works, opened his eyes to see a glory-filled world.

Speaking of cynicism, today we meet another man who also might have been boggled to consider our times and his story's place in this world. Again a world so different from his own - geographically, technologically mind-blowing and vast in its wonders. Nathanael: found in Galilee by Philip; Nathanael who would never have known that

centuries of people would hear his story. Nathanael teeters on the edge of despair and cynicism: he is a prime candidate when we first meet him to become the patron saint of eye-rollers and skeptics. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Anyone who crawls out of that backwater can't be worth my time or attention. And "Where did you get to know me?" Is this a parlor trick or a scam?

However long ago he lived, Nathanael would make a good mascot for us in our times. He's got a world-weariness that he wears like a cloak, protecting his heart and his hopes. He's suspicious of would-be cons and has some questions for anyone who might come along selling something. For those of us who have grown pessimistic and resigned to what seems like a perpetual downward spiral, Nathanael comes onto the scene as a kindred spirit. I can't be bothered to "come and see," I've been disappointed too often by unmet expectations. I know what people are like, especially people from places like Nazareth or however you and I would fill in that blank. Yet like our melancholic poet, Nathanael has just enough hope left in him to take a deep breath and get up and go see what his friends are so excited about. A little bit of him still believes in the beauty and splendor and possibility of God's world.

Let's pause to recognize what it takes for someone who's been waiting and waiting for the one "about whom Moses and the prophets wrote" to "come and see" one more time. Let's pause to give thanks for the estranged sons and daughters who keep loving the world. Let's pause and remember the spaces and places in our own lives when we thought the story was only doom and gloom, but still we held out or held on a little bit longer for the dawn. Let's pause and consider one element of the story of this extraordinary banner we sit beneath: that in a bleak time of fear and prejudice and illness, someone saw the light that could still come through. Let's pause and give thanks for the eye-rollers and would-be cynics who still have a little curiosity and faith tucked away and every now and then can bring that hope forward to come and see what dappled, greater things - even angels - might be found.

"Glory be to God for dappled things." Glory be to God for the strange and speckled and mottled and marbled and broken and barnacled world. When Nathanael meets Jesus, he is first taken in by the simple insight and perceptiveness of Jesus. But Jesus says, oh there is so much more. "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." Biblical scholar NT Wright paraphrases Jesus saying, "If you follow me, you'll be watching what it looks like when heaven and earth are open to each other."

The "if" is a big one. If you follow me, if you can open your mind and your heart to possibility, if you can believe in the splendor and beauty of God's world when it seems trashed and forgotten, if you can get up, "come and see," and follow even when you're tired and unsure if it will be worth your time or energy, if you can trade cynicism for hope.

It's a big if. And if we can, we will see angels ascending and descending, heaven and earth open to each other. No telling what that might look like - maybe a fireman up on a tall ladder hanging a work of art from some church rafters. Maybe the light dappling on this old, new floor, or one of those magical winter sunsets while driving down Poplar, maybe your friends showing up to share some really good news, maybe a little poetry coming to mind. Maybe Christ inviting you and me to let our uncertainty not be a shield, but to have enough humility and hope to come and see that the world is filled with the glory of God.