

## *Beginnings and Signs*

Homily for the Wednesday Christmas feria of January 5, 2022

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

Fr. Patrick Raymond

*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 toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get 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." John 1:43-51*

The liturgical seasons of Christmas and Epiphany are all about beginnings. Or at least it could be said that they are strewn with beginnings. Christmas announces a great and new beginning in the birth of the Messiah! Two of the gospels, Mark and John, omit any Nativity story, but even so the first verses of both gospels feature the word 'beginning.' This coming Sunday we will celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord, an event that marks the beginning of his adult public witness and ministry. And in weeks to come, we will hear of other beginnings in the lives of many as the ministry of Jesus grows and spreads.

I notice that beginnings in the Bible often arise in or from or out of the most unlikely of circumstances. In the primal beginning, from Genesis, the world was without form and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep. God made a new beginning in Israel by way of an outlaw in hiding named Moses who stuttered. God made a new beginning in the Christ child, Jesus, in the midst of a variety of family hardships, complications and awkward questions. In the context of these and other unlikely and challenging circumstances, God's new beginnings are also frequently accompanied by signs and miracles, dreams, stars, heavenly hosts. The gospel story for today takes us to the beginning of discipleship, and, later, apostolic ministry for two men: Philip and Nathanael. When Nathanael goes to investigate Jesus, at Philip's urging, Jesus looks right into him: "*Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!*" A further prophesy follows, ending with Jesus telling Nathanael that he '*will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.*'

I'm guessing that this was a watershed moment for Nathanael, one of those openings that cause one to measure life before and after. It was a new beginning.

But what might Nathanael's story signify for you or me? I've never had an experience exactly like Nathanael's, but in my own life and faith new beginnings are sometimes either preceded or accompanied by signs and connections and moments that are arguably God-given. It's as if the heavens open for a season, and the season seems to be or to become one of previously unimagined opportunity or calling or hope – a new beginning. If you're in a season of signs, take note of them, wonder, pray and follow. If you're not in such a season, cultivate an eye and a heart to know one when comes your way.

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One or two take-home assignments come to my mind in conjunction with Philip and Nathanael and in regard to beginnings and signs. First, you or I might identify any recent or current signs or apparent miracles in our lives. And then we might ask: What kind of new beginning might be suggested by those signs?

Or we may the inquiry inside out and start by asking not about signs but about beginnings already apparent or being considered or underway whether we like it or not. What has God recently begun in you or in your life, or what might God be calling you to begin. Is there some new chapter, some new challenge, some new opportunity, some new faith taking shape—in you, or in the world around you?

And if some God-given new beginning does appear to be coming your way, what ways of being or preconceptions or limitations are you to leave behind in order to begin, or to begin again, in God? Have there been any ways in which the new beginning in you has been confirmed or illuminated by an opening in the heavens? *Amen.*