

Second Sunday after the Epiphany
Jan 17th, 2021
Immanuel United Church

Welcome

Call to Worship:

Before anything was,
God dreamed of me.
God searches for me.
God finds me.
Before I speak,
God hears me.
Before I move,
God is before me.
Before I was born,
God knew me.
Before I was seen,
God saw me.
Before I was named,
God called me.
Before I give praise,
God calls me here.

Prayer:

O God, you are constantly present in our lives and in the world, like a lamp burning through the night. Reveal yourself to us and through us. Tune our hearts and minds to recognize your bright calling to us to live in ways that reflect your steadfast love. Amen.

Hymn: VU 82 ***A Light is Gleaming***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nk0BGqoIVNk>

Scripture: 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 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."

Reflection: Super Mario and the Kingdom of God
(John 1:43-51)

Today, I am going to talk about a common 'first love' - Super Mario. (show the picture) I know that it's not the first video game people might have played; Pong, Pac-Man and Tetris (show picture) all came to the world before Super Mario Brothers (1985) appeared. Mario's adventures captured the heart of many children in the 80's, on the original Nintendo Entertainment system. I first played Mario on a small hand-held Gameboy, then shortly after, on TV with a game stick. (show the picture.) My younger brother was really into video games; me, not so much. I enjoyed playing Super Mario, but I never got past the first two levels of the game.

I've been thinking about why children loved and still love Super Mario. The conversation between Jesus and Nathaniel in today's Gospel reading led me to recall my memory of playing Super Mario. In the Bible story, Nathaniel is not interested in upgrading his expectations of what could be possible and different in the world around him when his old friend, Philip, calls him and invites him to meet someone from Nazareth. Philip says to Nathaniel, "We have found the one whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." In response, Nathaniel expresses little interest retorting, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" His sentiment of doubt, long-term disappointment and disillusionment hinders him from opening to new possibilities. His main interest is in protecting himself from dismay or despair; he's not impressed by the low brand-name power of the small-town Nazareth. Philip still insists. "Come and See."

Today I want to talk with you about the role of positive thinking in our lives, what it actually means and its relevance to following the way of Jesus. This is where my fond memory of playing Super Mario kicks in. (Show the YouTube that demonstrates a few scenes from the game.) I think the fun this video game offered, and the way it kept kids' interest, was in the action in which the little hero, Super Mario, slightly taller than a turtle and smaller than a mushroom, jumps from below to get on to the blocks above to get rewards or avoid obstacles. Kids love to jump and leap around. Sometimes Super Mario leaps from lower blocks which are moving to higher blocks, which are also moving, while he tries to get away from the turtles and ducks and not fall. One more big thrill is this: On the way to the castle to release the world from the turtle's curses, Super Mario needs to find and hit Question Blocks with his head. These blocks release good things when hit; they help Super Mario add strength by dropping coins or releasing super mushrooms and fire flowers. Players learn quickly that it is good and important

to locate and hit as many Question Blocks as possible, including those which are hidden, invisible to them on the surface. Ultimately, players learn that all Questions Blocks in the Super Mario game are good, easing their defences and enabling them to trust and explore. I remember thinking to myself, "How wonderful it would be if Question Blocks were everywhere in the real world too; I will go and see!"

In today's Gospel story, Philip calls his friend Nathaniel and says, "Hey, I just found the Greatest Question Block which I believe Moses talked about and the prophets wrote about in the Books... He is Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth, and he's here in Galilee! Will you come and see? First, you must jump from the blocks under the fig tree and get here. This moving block will take you to find out what I mean!"

Events in our lives, especially those we are enduring during the Covid pandemic, can put us into a downward spiral of negativity, just like Nathaniel. For example, last week, a sudden realization came to me - I was becoming more immersed in anxiety-based thinking and I was transmitting that energy when I talked to my kids and to myself. I realized that, more and more each day, I was framing my words and interactions based on "What should happen, or What shouldn't happen? What if it happens, or What if it doesn't happen?"- type questions. They were embedded in my language and actions, as my subconscious mind was busy calculating all of the possible outcomes for every possible action. As our spatial and physical confinement is prolonged, lingering on through the winter, these bodily restrictions affect the mind as well. When I caught myself in this spiral of negativity, I decided to stop it. I told myself, "How beautiful my children are, and how resilient we are. We should move upward from tiredness and worry. I will not let my thinking be like a nail in the wall!" I vowed to move on from the influence of negativity to focus my language, perspective and actions on seeking new Blocks of positive Questions! Trust blocks. So, one morning I reframed the words I was going to say to Jah-bi who was still in bed at 7:40 am. If he does not get hurry, he might skip his breakfast again! I wanted to wake him up to go to school using positive, powerful words... I didn't have any real expectations about significant change until I said them. Rather than beginning my sentence with "If you don't wake up now" I changed it to "I always love to see you have a good breakfast and enjoy your school without feeling hungry." A miracle happened. In a millisecond, Jah-bi got up, put on his long-sleeve shirt and pants and socks and went downstairs for Cheerios and milk. I was more surprised than when Super Mario jumps and accidentally finds the Fire Flower in the hidden Question Block!

Jesus is the true great master of positive thinking. Jesus invites his followers to come and see that the Kingdom of God is here. The Kingdom of God is present, living, moving, alive and active in the present time and moment for people who seek it, who are open and eager to hit it with our whole self (not just our head!). Positive thinking is not the same as avoiding the truth in order to avoid suffering. Christians are called to "partner" with those who suffer. Positive thinkers tell the truth about the wrongs and hurts in the world without distorting or minimizing them. Positive thinkers can still be in pain, experience sorrow and exhaustion. However, in faith, positive thinkers endure everything in love, face evil in integrity and hold on to hope, because

we are not just individuals, and our goals are not just individualistic - we find power in participating in the work of the Wholly Mystery, Wholly Love, like millions and millions of stars shining singly and together. We trust in the positivity we find when we can be mindful in the present moment, and sing, "A light is gleaming, spreading its arms throughout the night, living in the light. Come share its gladness, God's radiant love is burning bright, living in the light." (VU 82 A Light Is Gleaming)

I hope this week we may experience the relaxation, courage and hope that can come from positive thinking, sensing the Kingdom of God that Jesus taught us to find is growing in the present, among us. The Kingdom is not just a destination; it's a journey, full of challenges, Question boxes and unexpected gifts. Reflect on what works well now, what brings well-being to us. Gently discover what is good and kind in our lives. Feel the soft power in those moments and events that show us the green light of Kingdom-of-God-Positivity. The Great Designer, God, has already scattered the Question Boxes of grace lavishly. If life can be compared to a video game, let us nurture and preserve the spaces and moments where we find ourselves jumping up to a higher level, finding unexpected gifts, filling ourselves with what is generous, possible, kind and abundant, rather than limiting our vision to worry-inspired words and actions.

In today's story, Philip still invites us, "Come and see."

Let us move forward with true hearts and an exploring, compassionate spirit. Like Super Mario, visit your Kingdom of God power, the superpower of care and love for yourself and for your loved ones today. (Ending the sermon with Super Mario music)

Hymn: MV 144 Like A Healing Stream (Click the picture below to play the YouTube video.)



Like a healing stream in a barren desert, Spirit water bringing life to dusty earth, God is trickling through our lives as in a dream unfolding, promising revival and rebirth... like a healing stream.

Like a gentle rain on a thirsty garden, Spirit water come to nourish tiny seed, God is bubbling through the soil to coax a new creation, yearning for an end to want and need... like a gentle rain.

Like a river strong with a restless current, Spirit water rushing on to distant shore,
God is carving out a channel in a new direction, calling for an end to hate and war...
like a river strong.

Like a mighty sea reaching far horizons, Spirit water with a love both deep and wide,
God is working in our hearts to shape a new tomorrow: God will always challenge and provide!
Like a mighty sea... Like a river strong... Like a gentle rain... Like a healing stream.

Prayers of the People:

Son of Joseph,
Child of God,
we give thanks that good things can come from Nazareth,
that holiness can emerge from the unexpected,
that blessing can show up in surprising ways,
that the extraordinary can develop from the most ordinary of circumstances.
Teach us
to set aside our prejudiced judgements,
to forego our narrow assumptions,
to unlock ourselves for new perspectives and new life.
Help us
to come and see,
to listen and learn,
to open ourselves to epiphany.

Child of Galilee,
Revealer of God,
we give thanks that you know us before we know you.
Beckon us into the blessings of calling and responding...
... those blessings we find with you, within ourselves, and with our beloved ones, neighbours
and strangers.

in these days
of polarities and pandemic pivoting,
of climate change and conflicts,
of tensions and turf wars,
we pray for our world.
May the heavens open.
May justice and compassion descend with the angels.
May our prayers for equity and peace ascend.
May hope and love abound for your kin-dom come ...
and imagine a future that looks like a joyful dance.

Hymn: VU 509 *I, the Lord of Sea and Sky*

Benediction:

**Beloved of God,
go into this world that God loves.
Bless it with your imagination;
transform it with your courage;
renew it with your compassion.
And may the Spirit's presence
fill you with abundant hope
and everlasting joy. Amen.**