

Called by Name: Nathanael and Seeing as Christ Sees

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; John 1:43-51

The Psalm the lectionary assigns for today is one of my favorites. Psalm 139 confidently asserts that God knows us through and through and watches over us in all of life. Listen now for God's word in Psalm 139.

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
 O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

*Where can I go from your spirit?
 Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
 if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
 and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
 and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
 and the light around me become night',
even the darkness is not dark to you;
 the night is as bright as the day,
 for darkness is as light to you.*

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
 My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
 all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!*

*How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end*—I am still with you.*

Our Gospel text from John's Gospel for today introduces us to a disciple named Nathanael, whose friend Philip tells him about Jesus of Nazareth. Notice how Nathanael reacts initially, and then see how his perspective changes once he comes and sees. He Comes and sees a man who knows more about him than he thought.

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.'

The lectionary group and I decided that from now until Easter, we'll be looking at each one of the disciples listed in the Gospels. Today we start with Nathanael, who was not the first to be called and certainly not the most famous. He's just Nathanael.

The thing about Nathanael was, he didn't mind saying what he was on his mind. In that respect, I suppose, he was not a lot different than his better known fellow disciple Simon Peter, who blurted out all sorts of things that someone who had more of a filter would think twice about saying. He was transparent, Nathanael. Honest. Authentic. He didn't try to pull the wool over anybody's eyes.

Nathanael didn't mind saying what was on his mind. So when his friend Philip searched him out and found him to tell him about Jesus, and shared that Jesus was the one that Moses had written about, the Messiah Israel had been looking for, and went on to say that Jesus was from Nazareth, Nathanael came out with it. "Nazareth? That one-horse, two-bit, village? Nazareth? That low-class, crime-infested dump? You've got to be kidding me, Philip."

Okay, so he didn't put it quite that way. He simply said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And by saying that, Nathanael showed not just what was on his mind, but also what was in his heart. What was in his heart was not very pretty.

I think Nathanael had come to believe and internalize and even to propagate what other people had told him about Nazareth, which was some variation on what you can hear said about all sorts of places, depending on where you live. *You can't really trust anybody from there. Nobody from there could amount to anything. Those people are a bunch of hicks, or moochers, or criminals, or snobs, or jerks.*

I remember when Judith and I were moving from the two churches we served in upstate New York to become co-pastors the church we served in Statesville, North Carolina. Before they ever met us—before we even preached our first sermons there, there was a congregational vote to approve the recommendation of the Pastor Nominating Committee to call us. There were people who later told us they voted against the call because we were Yankees—and everyone knew that nothing good could

come from New York. Never mind that Judith was born and raised in that very town. It's just, well, when you live in Nazareth for any period of time, can you really be trusted anymore?

Nathanael was just saying what was on his mind and in his heart and it revealed the kind of preconceptions and prejudice that cause us to write people off before we've ever even met them. If we're honest with ourselves, we've all done this to some degree or another, no matter how high-minded and open and tolerant we fancy ourselves to be.

On this weekend, when we celebrate the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., it's worth remembering what he said about white moderates in Birmingham who kept saying, "Just give it a little time, things will change eventually" and Northern whites who looked down their noses at Southerners but redlined their neighborhoods to keep African-Americans out. Because maybe something good *can* come from Nazareth, but you don't want to take a chance on having someone from Nazareth three houses down.

Can anything good come from Nazareth (or from some other country, or continent, or class, or race, or tribe, or party, or orientation)? That is the ugly question people have asked out loud, or under their breaths, or in the quiet space of their hearts for thousands, even millions, of years. Calling whole groups of people names or saying that their country or city or town is some sort of hole in the ground is a window into a base tribalism that reveals the worst of human nature. We have to be able to acknowledge that.

The beauty of today's text is that Nathanael moves beyond that, and in so doing he becomes the first recovering racist in the Gospel of John. In response to Nathanael's question, Philip says, "Come and see." Just come and see. Come and meet the man. Come, get beyond your preconceived notions and your settled opinions *and get to know somebody* from Nazareth. You might find they're a lot like you. You might meet Jesus.

This is, of course, what Nathanael does. And as he's heading in the direction of Jesus, the Nazarene, he is stopped in his tracks by what Jesus says. "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

Hearing this, Nathanael thinks, "Wait, how does this guy know me?" And because he thinks it, he says it, which may be why Jesus says he's an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.

To Nathanael's "How do you know me?" Jesus replies, "I saw you under the fig tree, before Philip called you." That's when Nathanael exclaims, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel!"

Wow. That's a quick transition isn't it? Moving from "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" to "You are the son of God, the King of Israel."?

I've been puzzling out why Jesus telling Nathanael that he saw him under the fig tree would lead to such a dramatic turnaround from skepticism to praise. And what occurred to me is that in the Bible, especially the New Testament, a fig tree is never just a fig tree. It's always a symbol.

Diana Butler Bass reminded me in something that she wrote recently that the fig tree is the third tree mentioned in Genesis. The first is the tree of life, the second is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the third is the fig tree. You know why the fig tree is the third tree? Because it that provides the leaves that Adam and Eve use to cover up their nakedness and shame.

To say I saw you under the fig tree could be a way of saying, “Hey, as honest as you are, I also know what you are trying to cover up.” It kind of makes you wonder what Nathanael was in fact doing under the fig tree.

And in the New Testament, the fig tree is a symbol of the fruitfulness—or lack thereof—of God’s people. *By your fruits you shall know them.* Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree that isn’t bearing fruit, and the landowner wants to destroy it, but the one who tends it says, “Give me a few more years to fertilize and water it.” Then later Jesus talks about the fig tree being in leaf meaning that you know summer is near. And during Holy Week, when Jesus is a wee bit stressed and a fig tree isn’t bearing fruit, Jesus, in a fit of anger, blasts it. A fig tree is never just a fig tree. It’s a sign that what you say and do matters. So *bear fruit*, John the Baptist said, *that shows that you’ve turned to God.*

What happens with Nathanael is that he gets beyond prejudice and sees in Jesus *someone who sees him and doesn’t just write him off*, just because he’s *not* from Nazareth. That’s what it means to see like Christ sees.

And when Philip invites him to come and see Jesus, maybe he’s inviting Nathanael not just to come and see Jesus, but to begin to come to see like Jesus see—not with arms folded in judgment... not distracted by all the cares and worries of the world... not blinded by preconceived notions... not impeded by prejudice—but the way Mary Oliver talks about in the poem on the bulletin cover:

*I look, morning and night, I am never done with looking.
Looking, I mean not just standing around, but standing around as with your arms open.¹*

I was standing around with my arms open this week when I went to the mailbox and found there a hand-written letter addressed to *Pastors Aaron, Katie, Susan, and the congregation of Immanuel Church.*

I’ll just read a portion of it. After quoting John 15:12-15, which recounts the command that Jesus gives to “love each other as I have loved you,” the person who wrote the letter says:

My new friends, than you for the wonderful and warm hospitality you showed me and all the other homeless at your church. You came into my life at a time when I had no friends (at least not friends who do not use drugs or alcohol) and housed, fed, and clothed me. At no time with you did I feel like a man with nothing. You all made me feel like the richest man in McLean!! It is impossible to explain what you have done for me. Thank you seems so small and paltry.

Can anything good come from Nazareth? That’s a question that might be asked about us. Or anyone else, for that matter.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

¹ Mary Oliver, “Where Does The Temple Begin, Where Does It End?”, *Why I Wake Early: New Poems*, (Beacon Press, 2005)