

Second Sunday After Epiphany

January 14th, 2018

Pastor Matthew Ude

John 1:43-51 ⁴³ The following day Jesus wanted to go to Galilee, and He found Philip and said to him, "Follow Me." ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote -- Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." ⁴⁶ And Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!" ⁴⁸ Nathanael said to Him, "How do You know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." ⁴⁹ Nathanael answered and said to Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹ And He said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

How many of you spent your high school years trying to be or wishing to be one of the cool kids?

Nathanael is disdainful of Nazareth because it isn't big important, popular. Nathanael thinks, "what is Nazareth? That is a small meaningless town, surely the king of the world can't come from such a town as this." It is as if he says "surely the messiah would go to the best schools and belong to an old and distinguished family." If the Messiah had really come surely he would be hanging out in Jerusalem with the wise, with the powerful, with the "cool kids."

But here we see how much our thoughts are not God's thoughts. Jesus doesn't come in the way or in the place that we expect him. He doesn't think or act the way we expect him to.

Jesus shows that He doesn't think this way. He goes out of his way to find Philip and then calls Philip and Nathanael by name. He chose them.

Who were they that He should choose them? Philip and Nathanael were nothing and no one, regular people. If you want to make a difference in the world, you go and get the big shots. The ones educated at Harvard. The ones who have family connections to the president.

"God has chosen the foolish things of this world to put to shame the wise."

Before they came to Him he chose them, just as He has chosen us. Though we are nothing, yet the Lord chose us and brought us to Him. We might not have all been with the “cool” group in high school. But we have all been chosen by Jesus and called to Him.

Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!"

Nathanael may have been surprised; this is not what he was expecting the Messiah the son of David to be. But he is humble enough to test it out, to investigate, to go and see. It no doubt helped out a lot that it was Philip who told him.

Here we see the difference between Nathanael and so many of the “wise” of this world. They are so certain, so confident in their own minds. If God were real this is what he would be like and look like. The Bible is clearly just a book. The fact that God reveals himself in the form of a poor carpenter from a backwater village in the middle of nowhere and then proceeds to get himself killed, is all the proof they need, this can't be the Son of God. Utter foolishness.

But Nathanael is of a different spirit, He is surprised, this isn't what he thought he was looking for but he is humble enough to go and look.

And He finds a Messiah, not one that does mighty miracles, not one who brings fire down from heaven, but one who knows him by name. Jesus does something so much better than calling fire from heaven. He calls Nathanael by name. He shows that He is the good shepherd.

Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!

This is a direct reference to the story of Jacob. Jacob means the deceiver. Jacob was always trying to get things through his own craftiness. Israel was the name given to Jacob when he learned to put his trust in God. Nathanael is NOT a deceiver like the Jewish leaders, but a true Israelite, one who has learned to put his trust in the Word of God.

This isn't quite enough for Nathanael; he responds, “you think you know me so well you never met me.” There may have been sin and guilt on Nathanael's part, not really believing that this could be true of him.

Jesus proves clearly that he did know him quite well.

Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.

The significance of the fig tree is something we will never know. And it doesn't matter. What matters is that it was significant to Nathanael. It was something personal, and therefore proof that Jesus was the good shepherd who knew him personally. This wasn't just some parlor trick with Jesus guessing his name. This was the good shepherd calling him by name.

In his gospel John points to many different things to prove that Jesus is the Messiah. The Baptist sees the dove descending. Peter James and John hear the testimony of the Baptist. In the next chapter the water is turned into wine. But the thing that convinces Nathanael is that the Lord knows Him personally. This is the voice of the good shepherd who cares for each of his sheep.

This is a far more compelling proof of who Jesus is and the truth of God's word than we often give it credit for. The ultimate test for any philosophical statement, is does it fit with reality. And what the word of God says about us fits the truth of who we are 100%.

A pastor was once getting his annual checkup from his dentist, who also happened to be his member. During their conversation the dentist told the pastor how shocked he was at how many of his friends took bribes from companies to push certain procedures on their patients. One dentist friend had a free trip to Hawaii because he had convinced x number of patients to do a certain procedure that few of them needed. Of course the pastor wasn't surprised.

The word of God knows what we are, selfish, greedy, sinful people, to the last one of us.

Given that God so clearly knows us so well, even all those intimate secrets that we keep well hidden from everyone else. It's all the more miraculous that he says to us "you are mine." We are His sheep and He is our shepherd.

This is the point that Jesus makes next. You believe just because I knew you were sitting under a fig tree?

That is nothing, Jesus says, Wait until you see me open the gates of heaven and lead sinners into the presence of God.

We have here another allusion to the story of Jacob. For Jacob saw a ladder to heaven in a dream and the angels of God ascending and descending upon it. What Jacob did not understand was that ladder was Jesus.

Jesus is the way to heaven, and it is his death on the cross that opens heaven and allows us to go up into the presence of God. Therefore there is little doubt what Jesus is referring to here. The greater sign is His own death on the cross.

Just as we said last week the miracle of baptism is greater than the miracle of God creating light out of nothing. So Jesus reminds us this week that his death for the forgiveness of sins is a far greater miracle than the fact that He knows Nathanael's name and that he was sitting under a tree.

Again the wise of the world would despise this, "he went and got himself killed on a cross, clearly he is not God." In fact the wise of the world at that time said the same thing. "If you are the son of God come down and we will believe on you." Funny how people think they are so much more advanced than the people of Jesus day, and yet they pretty much repeat their exact thoughts. But this is what Paul reminds us "the cross is . . . foolishness to the Greeks."

Yet to us it is the greatest miracle. The God who so clearly knows us so well, still dies for our sins, still calls us by name, and still is our good shepherd.

Amen