

A True Israelite in Whom there Is No Deceit

In the name of him who is both the Son of God and the King of Israel, dear friends in Christ: During the season of Epiphany it's the tradition of the church to revisit the events of the early portion of Jesus' ministry. And that's where we are in today's Gospel: at the very start, as Jesus is just beginning to teach and gather to himself a group of disciples. So let me give you a little background that will help us understand what's going on in today's text.

The location is the Jordan River where John is baptizing. And you remember what the ministry of John is all about. He's here to prepare the way for Jesus. And in that regard, his mission is twofold. First he is calling people to repentance. With his fiery preaching he convicts his hearers of their many sins so that they will rightly fear the judgment of God and thus see their need for forgiveness and for a Savior. And that's the second part of John's mission: to announce that the Savior everyone has been waiting for is here – his feet are on the ground and he will very soon be revealed.

Okay, so John has been at this for a year or more. And there are crowds of people always coming to hear him and to be baptized by him, and then they return to their homes; but in addition to this, there are some fellows who stay on for longer periods to study under John. Maybe they stay for a few weeks or months; but while they are with him, they are John's disciples. They take it to the next level, so to speak, going deeper into the study of the Scriptures with John. Perhaps they adopt some of John's ascetic lifestyle: the rough clothes and unappetizing diet. They fast and pray with him. Maybe too they assist John with his ministry. And it's important that we know this because some of the men that Jesus calls to be his disciples were first disciples of John.

Well, then the big day came for John. It happened about a month and a half earlier – before what goes on in today's reading – when Jesus himself came to be baptized by John. That's when John knew for sure who Jesus was, when he saw the Spirit of God descend upon him in the form of a dove and he heard the voice from heaven say, "This is my beloved Son". We talked about that last week. Well, what happens next is that immediately after his Baptism, Jesus is led by the Spirit eastward into the desert wasteland in order to undergo 40 days of fasting and temptation by the devil. It's to prepare him for the ministry he is about to launch. And now, successfully having withstood this ordeal, Jesus is back.

All right; the day before today's text, John the Baptizer saw Jesus coming toward him, and he said to two of his disciples who were standing there, "Look, there he is: the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Hearing this, these two (who turn out to be Jesus' disciples Andrew and John), decide to follow after Jesus. And when Jesus realizes he's being followed, he turns around and says, "What do you guys want?" Caught off guard, they answered, "Teacher, where are you staying?" Jesus said, "Come on, I'll show you." They spend the rest of the day with Jesus listening to him teach. Andrew is so impressed that he goes to fetch his brother, Simon. He brings him to Jesus. And Jesus welcomes him and renames him Peter. Thus Jesus is beginning to gather the initial core of those who will be his disciples.

Good. Now it's the next day, where our text picks up. Jesus decides it's time to strike out on his own and return to Galilee, presumably with these three men in tow. It's then that he

spots Philip and calls him also to follow. Philip doesn't waste any time. He comes right away. And it's not long before he knows that Jesus is the promised Savior. Like Andrew, Philip wants to share this discovery. He goes to get Nathaniel who is a friend or perhaps a relative of his – but they're all from the same hometown, and they've all been studying under John the Baptizer.

But unlike Peter, Nathaniel drags his feet a bit. When Philip runs up to him full of excitement and exclaims, "We've found him – the one Moses and the prophets wrote about: it's Jesus of Nazareth!" Nathaniel replies with a jaundiced, "What? Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" I've noticed that no matter where you are, there's always a place like that. When I lived in Oregon, California was the brunt of all the jokes. In eastern Montana, it was North Dakota. Around here I suppose that people would ask if anything can good come from Missouri. But you get the idea: it seems that if you lived in Galilee, Nazareth was that place. And why not? It was a Podunk little speck of a village hardly anyone had heard of. It's never mentioned in the Old Testament, and certainly no prophecy concerning the Christ ever spoke of it. But Philip isn't about to let Nathaniel's pessimism rain on his parade. "Just come with me and see for yourself." And that, my friends, is how evangelism is done; but that's another sermon.

And I don't know, maybe Jesus realized that Nathaniel would be a tougher customer to convince; but when he saw Nathaniel coming toward him, he said, "Behold, here's a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit." It's a heavily loaded statement, and I'll explain it in a minute; but it intrigues Nathaniel because he knows that he's never met Jesus. "How do you know me?" he asks. Jesus explains, "When you were under the fig tree I saw you."

Now, it's rather apparent that something happened under that fig tree which Nathaniel knows no one else could possibly have any knowledge of. He realizes that this Jesus has supernatural insight into his very soul. And so he blurts out, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God and the King of Israel!"

The question is, what did Jesus see about Nathaniel, which happened under the fig tree and that prompted him to say about Nathaniel that he was a true Israelite without any deceit in him? It took me some time to figure it out; but with much prayer and reflection on the text, I think I've got the answer. It goes back to the story of Jacob in the book of Genesis. Let me refresh your memory about him. He was the younger twin brother of Esau. His parents were Isaac and Rebekah. And as he was being born, he reached out and took hold of his brother's heel. That's how he got his name, Jacob, which means "heel grabber". But in Hebrew idiom, to grab someone's heel means to trip them up by trickery or deceit. It's kind of like saying in English, "I'm pulling your leg", except it has a much stronger negative connotation. So Jacob means liar, cheater, deceiver; something like that.

And you'll remember that he spent most of his life living up to his name. First there was the occasion that he tricked his brother who was half dead with hunger and exhaustion out his very valuable birthright. And then later, when their blind old father, Isaac, wanted to give a special blessing to his older son, Jacob pretended to be Esau. He wore Esau's clothes so that we would smell like his brother, and he wore goatskins on his forearms and his neck so that he would feel like his hairy brother. And when his father asked, "Who are you?" he replied, "I am Esau, your firstborn son." Thus, through deceit and treachery, he got the blessing of his father.

Esau, for his part, didn't like being cheated. He resolved to kill his treacherous brother. So Jacob fled for his life. He went to live with his uncle Laban, who turned out to be pretty skilled in the lying and cheating department himself. They spend the next twenty years or so

trying to outwit each other. But then finally comes the day that the Lord tells Jacob it's time to return home. He does so; together with his wives (he's got four of them by now) and his kids, and all the flocks and herds the Lord has blessed him with, he strikes out for Canaan. But then on the way he finds out that his brother Esau is coming to meet him with a party of 400 armed men. It doesn't look good for Jacob. He's terrified. He's convinced that the day of his brother's wrath and judgment is upon him.

Now, it happens that he's come to the ford of the Jabbok River. It's evening. Jacob knows that in the morning, he'll have to face Esau. So he sends his family and all his possessions across the ford, but he himself stays on the other side. He's too afraid to go forward. And then a most amazing thing happens. A man appears and begins to wrestle with Jacob. It turns out to be the Lord himself. They struggle all through the night, neither one gaining the upper hand. And then in the morning, as dawn begins to break, the Lord reaches out and wounds Jacob's hip joint. The Lord says, "Now, let me go"; but Jacob won't do it. Curled up on the ground with his arms wrapped around the Lord's ankle, that is, grabbing the Lord's heel, he says, "No, I won't let you go until you bless me!" He wants some assurance that this day will not be his last.

And the Lord says, "All right; what is your name?" And this is important because the last time he wanted a blessing, he lied. He pretended to be someone else. This time he tells the truth. "I am Jacob", he says. And you see, it's more than a name. It's a confession. "I'm a liar. I'm a cheat. I am full of deceit. That's who I am. And I'm scared of dying." And at last he's come clean. He's telling it like it is. So the Lord says, "No longer will your name be Jacob – the deceiver. You are now Israel, that is, he who contends with God and wins." And then the Lord gives him a blessing. He crosses the ford and arrives just in time to see his brother, Esau, with his small army thundering down on his encampment. Jacob – or now I should say Israel – bows down before his brother likely expecting to receive a death blow; but instead Esau raises him up, wraps his arms around him, and says, "Welcome home, little brother!" All the rotten things he did to Esau are forgiven and forgotten.

Now, I know that this was a rather lengthy explanation, but the point of all of this concerns the question "How does one stand before the Lord?" "How do I secure his blessing?" "How do I avoid the judgment of death I richly deserve?" You see, Jacob goes through his life trying to do it on his own. He's always lying, cheating, and deceiving others. He's pretending to be someone other than who he really is. And in that sense, he represents all of us. We all go through life pretending outwardly to be good, to be nice, and to be helpful to others; but inside we're rotten. We're resentful, prideful, jealous, envious; we're always thinking selfish, lustful, and covetous thoughts. And in this sense we struggle with God hoping to earn his favor by our outward pretense of being good. But you can't win with the Lord that way. That way leads to death and judgment.

Ah, but when we come clean, when broken and fearful we cling to the Lord, confessing our sins, and holding fast to his heel – that is his bruised heel which crushed the serpent's head, a reference to the cross of Christ – then we receive his blessing, his forgiveness, and a new name: Israel – he who contends with God and wins—wins not by beating him; but by confessing our sin and holding on to him for grace and mercy.

Going back to Nathaniel, then, what Jesus saw under the fig tree was Nathaniel making his confession of sin to the Lord. And it makes sense: Nathaniel's been here listening to John the Baptizer, whose powerful hellfire and brimstone preaching has revealed to him what's in his heart. He too, like everyone else, had been wrapped up in the myth of his own goodness; but

John tore that costume and mask away. It left him a broken man. And no doubt with tears of sorrow, he poured his heart out to the Lord. Alone and under the fig tree, he confessed his sin and innate sinfulness. He told the truth about himself – which is why Jesus says of him that he's true Israel and no Jacob. He's not deceiving himself anymore, nor is he deceiving anyone else. And thus he has become one who wins with respect to God.

He wins again, of course, when Philip brings him to Jesus who forgives and blesses those who are broken over their sin and who confess it truthfully. Jesus is the answer to Nathaniel's prayer for a Savior from his sin. And Nathaniel sees that. He understands that this Jesus of Nazareth – a place he's just insulted – knows more than any mere human could know about him. It satisfies him that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and the promised King of Israel. He's gone from complete skeptic to devoted disciple.

And Jesus assures him that he hasn't seen anything yet. "What? You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? I tell you the truth, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." It's another reference to the life of Jacob. It happened when he was fleeing from his brother after stealing his blessing. Jacob stopped for the night to rest hidden among some rocks atop a hill for fear that Esau might be pursuing him. But that night he had a dream. He saw heaven opened and a grand set of stairs on which the angels of God were coming down to earth and ascending back into heaven. And from head of the stairs he heard the Lord speak: He promised to be with Jacob, to watch over and protect him, and to bring him back safely to the Promised Land and give it to him and his descendants as their inheritance. When Jacob awoke, he was filled with awe. He said, "The Lord is in this place, and I didn't realize it. This truly is the house of God and the gateway to heaven."

This is what Jesus is saying to Nathaniel. He's telling him, "I am that stairway that Jacob saw. I am the dwelling place of God on earth. I am the gateway to heaven. And all those promises I made to Jacob way back then, I now make to you: I will be with you, I'll watch over and protect you, and I will bring you safely to the eternal Promised Land. You will see it all as you follow me."

And so he did, as did the other disciples of Jesus who, like Nathaniel, confessed their sins and their need for the Savior: Jesus of Nazareth – the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world by his perfect life given as the sacrifice of atonement. And we too will see it as we continue to be true Israelites in whom there is no deceit. So may our God and Father give us the grace always to stop deceiving ourselves, and to see, acknowledge, and repent of our many sins, that we too clinging to Christ and refusing to let him go, may grapple with God and win. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!