

More Than Expected

In the name of him who bids us, “Follow me”, dear friends in Christ: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” So asked Nathanael with a sarcastic sneer when his friend Philipp told him that he and a few other mutual acquaintances had found the promised Savior. It’s safe to say that Nathanael didn’t believe it. And when he grudgingly allowed his friend to lead him to Jesus, it’s certain that he wasn’t expecting to be impressed.

But let’s back up a bit and set the stage. We’re down by the Jordan River where John the Baptizer is calling people to repentance and thus preparing the way of the Lord. Nathanael is with a small group of men from Bethsaida in Galilee who have made the pilgrimage out here to the desert. After their own baptisms, they have lingered a while to receive further instruction from the rough clad, bug-eating herald of the Messiah. Besides Nathanael the group includes John the son of Zebedee, the brothers Andrew and Peter, and obviously Philipp. There may be others with them, but if so they are not named.

At this point Jesus too has been baptized, and has recently returned from his forty days of fasting and temptation in the wilderness. Upon seeing Jesus again, the Baptizer pointed him out to Andrew and John, who happened to be standing nearby. He told them that’s the one I’ve been telling you is coming. “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

Andrew and John decided to check him out. They followed after Jesus and spent the rest of the day hearing him teach and getting acquainted. Andrew was so persuaded that he brought his brother Peter to meet Jesus. None of these three men has actually been called by Jesus to be one of his disciples. That will come later. For the time being they’ve sort of self attached to him out of curiosity.

That’s where our text for this morning picks up. It’s early the next day, and Jesus decides to strike out for Galilee. He’s done here in the desert. He’s ready to begin his own public ministry. Since he’s heading in the direction of their hometown, Andrew, Peter, and John decide to go with him. As they are preparing to leave, Jesus spies Philipp and says to him, “Follow me”. Properly speaking, then, he is the first of the twelve disciples to be called by Jesus. And he doesn’t waste any time. Immediately he seeks out his friend Nathanael. He wants him to know Jesus and follow him too.

It only makes sense. This is what they came out to the desert for. Word was that the Baptizer was preparing people to receive the Savior who, John claimed, was about to be revealed. So they came and subjected themselves to the Baptizer’s scorching sermons and blistering rebukes. They had thought of themselves as pretty decent men and fairly observant Jews. They didn’t think that way when John was done with them. He exposed the sins in their lives like the layers of an onion, revealing that the rot of evil found its origin in the very core of their beings down deep in their hearts. With tears of shame and remorse they went into the water for baptism. They heard the words of God’s forgiveness and felt cleansed. And then they stayed around to listen to John teach them how to be better and more faithful men in the future.

But the most important part of John’s teaching was that he was only the forerunner. The Messiah is here among you, he told them. My job is to point you to him. And well, now, there he is. You don’t need me anymore. That’s the guy to go to now. And Philipp got the message.

So now, having been called by Jesus and having encountered with him Andrew, Peter, and John who no doubt filled him in a bit, Philipp is convinced. He goes to share his discovery with Nathanael.

That's what provokes the latter's disparaging remark about Nazareth. How could someone as important as the world's Savior come from a miserable, obscure little village like that? To Nathanael the thought is absurd. More than that, we can detect no small amount of wariness in Nathanael's reply. He's been disappointed before, bitterly so. He's on guard about getting any hopes up. This unheard of carpenter's son doesn't sound like a likely prospect to be Israel's long promised Messiah. Yet, out of friendship, perhaps, he reluctantly allows himself to be led to Jesus. His expectations are very low.

From what we know of Jesus' appearance, Nathanael's first look at him would have confirmed his suspicions. As Isaiah wrote, "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him." No, Jesus looked pretty much like any other Jewish peasant of the time. There's no way anyone could have picked him out of a crowd and said, "That guy, yeah, he sure looks like the Messiah to me."

It wasn't what he saw in Jesus that impressed Nathanael; it's what he heard him say. To start there was the intriguing statement about himself that caught his attention: "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" That put Nathanael off guard. This guy acts like he knows me, but we've never met. What's he trying to do, butter me up with compliments? He asks Jesus, "How do you know me?" Jesus replies, "Before Philipp called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you."

Philipp finds this statement utterly astonishing. He blurts out, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" This tells us that something happened with Philipp under that tree which no one else could possibly have known about, something very private and deeply personal. And based on what Jesus said about Nathanael, it isn't hard to figure out what it was.

You see, there is a pun in the words "an Israelite in whom there is no deceit". It harks back to the story of Jacob whom, later in his life, God renamed Israel. His given name, Jacob, means deceiver, cheater, conniver; something like that. And it fit him very well. Recall how he cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright by taking advantage of him when he was weak with hunger. And how he later deceived his blind father, Isaac, so that he gave Jacob the blessing that he intended to give to Esau. His mother, Rebekkah, helped him in this ruse by disguising him as his older twin. But when he presented himself and his father asked who he was, Jacob lied, and said that he was Esau.

Deceit and treachery were the mark of Jacob's ways. He was ever trying to get ahead by taking advantage of others. More to the point, he thought he could obtain the blessing of God through his dishonest efforts – which is really foolish when you think about it: I'm going to do wrong so that God will bless me. It's insane. The irony is that God had already chosen to bless Jacob. And he did bless him in many ways despite Jacob's struggle to achieve God's blessings through dishonest means.

But then the Lord brought Jacob to the day of reckoning. He had to teach him the way things really are. The Lord told him to return from where he had been hiding out for over twenty years to avoid the wrath of Esau whose last words concerning Jacob were about how much he would enjoy killing him for what he done. Now, on his return, Jacob learns that Esau is coming to meet him, riding at the head of four hundred armed men. Jacob is terrified. He's come to the

end of himself. As night falls, he knows that in the morning he will meet the brother he cheated and robbed. That's bad enough; but then suddenly, out of nowhere, a stranger appears and begins to wrestle with Jacob. They fight all night long, neither one of them able to gain the upper hand. As dawn begins to break, we learn that the stranger is none other than the Lord himself. He tries to leave, but Jacob won't let him. He clings to him for all he's worth, demanding a blessing before he lets him go.

We come to understand that this wrestling match is an illustration of Jacob's whole life. He's been fighting with the Lord to get blessings that the Lord wants to give him anyway – by grace alone – without all Jacob's struggle and fighting. So, before giving the blessing, the Lord asks Jacob his name. "I am Jacob", he says. And this is key: the last time he sought a blessing, he lied and said that he was Esau. Now he tells the truth. And the thing to see is that Jacob is more than his name, it's a confession of his sin. "I am a deceiver, a liar, a cheat." And that's when the Lord renames him. In view of his confession of sin, the Lord says, "No longer will you be called Jacob. Now you are Israel" – a name that means "He struggles with God and wins".

Now, I know that's a lot of explanation, but it tells us what Jesus meant when he said of Nathanael, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit." He's saying that Nathanael is all Israel and no Jacob. In other words, he's come to his moment of crisis. Now he is telling the truth. That's what was going on under the fig tree. Nathanael had come to the end of himself. And it's not hard to guess how it happened. He had come with the others to hear the Baptizer. He was convicted of his sin and he repented. He received the baptism of forgiveness. And with the help of John's ascetic disciplines, all the fasting and praying and self-denial, he thought he could be a righteous, God-pleasing man. From now on I will earn God's favor and blessing.

Except that it didn't work out that way. In his struggle to free himself from sin, he found that it only got worse. The more self-discipline he applied, the more conscious he became of his sin and how deep it went. He found that the righteous demands of God's Law are far more difficult to achieve than he had expected; impossible in fact. Like his ancestor Jacob, he came to despair of himself, discovering that he could only cling to the Lord and beg him for a blessing that he knew he could never earn or deserve.

Jesus knew about this personal crisis Nathanael endured. And he answered his prayer through Philipp who led Nathanael to himself, to the One who would give him by grace the righteousness he had tried so hard and failed to achieve on his own.

Yes, Jesus turned out to be a lot more than Nathanael expected. Through this personal word of revelation, he saw that Jesus was indeed the One of whom Moses and the prophets had written. He confessed Jesus to be both Son of God and King. And Jesus told him "You will see greater things than these ... You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

This is another reference to the life of Jacob. When he was fleeing from his brother's wrath, Jacob camped near Bethel. That night while sleeping, he had a vision of a staircase that linked heaven and earth. Angels were going up and down it, the warriors and messengers of God coming to earth and going into heaven as they carried out their assignments from the Lord. In the morning Jacob awoke and said, "Surely God is in this place and I did not know it." The place turned out to be a lot more than he expected.

That's what Jesus is telling Nathanael. He's saying / am the link between heaven and earth. I am the One through whom God's gracious will for humankind is accomplished. You will come to see that. He would indeed. And it would happen in the most unexpected way. Just as Nathanael had asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth", with the rest of the disciples he was forced later to wonder, "Can anything good come from this cross?" Certainly it was another moment of crisis for all of them when the man they confessed to be Son of God and King was suffering through his crucifixion. All of them were then forced to face their weaknesses, their lack of faith in him, and their utter despair of themselves.

Fortunately for them – and for us – Jesus and that cross turned out to be a lot more than they expected. After he appeared to them alive again, they came to know that Christ crucified is the link between heaven and earth that opens the heavens and eternal life to all who despair of themselves and confess the living Lord Jesus as Son of God, Savior, and King.

May God in his mercy keep us in this saving faith, humble and repentant, so that he may also say of each of us, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit." In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!