

Year B, Epiphany 2  
1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20)  
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18  
1 Corinthians 6:12-20  
John 1:43-51

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January 18, 2015

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer. *Amen.*

One of my colleagues admitted recently that John is his least favorite Gospel. He prefers the synoptic Gospels because their focus on the incarnate God in our Lord Jesus Christ provides us with a human example for being in relationship with God and with each other. He believes John's focus on the divine nature of Christ makes it harder for us to pattern our lives after him. That may be true; John's Gospel begins by revealing the divine nature of Christ and continues with stories that are more mystical than those in the other Gospels. John's stories put us right in the middle of divinity and discipleship, reminding us that there is something for us to learn from both sides.

Today we have this odd little story about Jesus and Philip, and their encounter with Nathanael. As we explore its message, there are some interesting details to consider. For example, in verse forty-three, we learn that Jesus *decided* to go to Galilee. According to John he wasn't forced or driven or led by God or God's Spirit to go anywhere, unlike Mark's and Matthew's stories of Jesus' baptism and wilderness experience. John indicates that even in his divinity Jesus made choices and decisions that expressed his God-given gift of individual freedom. He himself had something to do with what happened to him, just as we have a part in whatever happens to us.

As he travels, Jesus finds Philip, and then Philip finds Nathanael. When Philip says, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth," Nathanael is understandably skeptical. This was not as he had been taught. The Hebrew scriptures, which religious Jews knew well, didn't mention Nazareth, so it wasn't connected to any messianic expectations. Nor was Galilee. Folks who were looking for the Messiah expected him to come out of the former kingdom of Judah, specifically Bethlehem—not Galilee. Nathanael responds with an odd, sarcastic question, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nazareth was a small village of only two hundred to four hundred people. It was economically dependent on the nearby city of Sepphoris, and very different from Cana, Nathanael's hometown.

Perhaps there is a bit of snobbery in Nathanael's question, too. After all, communities have reputations just as people do. I remember feeling insulted when I learned that those cute boys from the affluent neighborhoods of East Memphis, Tennessee didn't want anything to do with girls from West Memphis, Arkansas, less than ten miles away. It was more than a simple geographic unacceptability, although that was part of it. Those well-heeled city folks from Memphis thought people from the Arkansas Delta were unrefined redneck farmers. Perhaps Nathanael figured that anyone from a tiny town like Nazareth could be nothing more than a country bumpkin.

There's another question for us to consider about Nathanael himself. Who is this guy? He's not mentioned as a disciple in the other Gospels, and in fact is named only twice in John's Gospel, here and in Chapter 21, verse 2, in the third of Jesus' appearances to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. Nathanael is justifiably perplexed when Jesus says about him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." There's a hint for us in Jesus' remark to Nathanael, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." In ancient Hebrew culture, "under the fig tree" was a proper place for studying Torah. It was also a symbol of peace and security. So Jesus knew something about Nathanael from his outward appearance.

Generally speaking, outward appearances are the way that we first come to know each other as human beings. First impressions are often lasting impressions, and sometimes they are the only way we know someone. Despite our desire to be non-judgmental, we *do* judge others—by the way they look, the way they act, the things they say; by the ways that their actions affirm their words

and their words affirm their actions. It's easy to forget that others judge us in the same way, and if integrity is missing in us others will eventually notice. For Christians those outward appearances of word and action are particularly important, both in our personal lives and in the life of our community, especially as we invite others to come and see as Philip invited Nathanael. Notice that was all that Philip said to Nathanael after telling him who Jesus was: "Come and see." He didn't offer details or arguments or apologies, only an invitation for Nathanael to discern for himself. Phillip left the rest to Jesus. And Jesus turned a potential negative into a positive.

How did Jesus know there was no deceit in Nathanael? Could it be that Jesus overheard Nathanael's comment about nothing good coming from Nazareth? Or did he notice a shift in the conversation as he came closer to Philip and Nathanael, like that quick cover-up we do when we're talking about someone who suddenly shows up in the middle of our conversation? We probably wouldn't want anyone to overhear us saying something like Nathanael said, even if it was the truth. It's too direct; there's no sugar-coating, someone's feelings might be hurt by a comment like that. Yet, if he did in fact hear it, Jesus is not condemning Nathanael for it, but instead seems to accept Nathanael's directness, even to praise him for his openness and honesty.

John reminds us that as the incarnate God, Jesus knows more about us than we know about ourselves. On a bad day that can feel like a mixed blessing. The Psalmist captures it well:

Lord, you have searched me and known me;  
you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar.  
You trace my journeys and my resting-places, and are acquainted with all my ways.  
Indeed there is not a word on my lips, but you, O Lord, know it altogether.  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain to it.  
Where can I go then from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

The same sentiment is expressed in the collect for purity we pray each Sunday: "Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid." In those words we admit that God knows the good things about us but also the things that are not so good; even those secrets we find difficult to admit to ourselves. God knows. And knowing that God knows can be both comforting and frightening. Our deepest desire is to be known well and loved anyway, and on some level we may fear that if the truth about us becomes known, we might be misunderstood, we might not be loved, even by God. In lives of faith that fear is unfounded. Just as Jesus knew Nathanael and loved him, Jesus knows and loves us.

Pema Chödrön tells the story of Naropa, an eleventh-century Indian yogi, who one day unexpectedly met an old hag on the street. She apparently knew he was one of the greatest Buddhist scholars in India and asked him if he understood the words of the large book he was holding. He said he did, and she laughed and danced with glee. Then she asked him if he understood the meaning of the teachings in that book. Thinking to please her even more, he again said yes. At that point she became enraged, yelling at him that he was a hypocrite and a liar. That encounter changed Naropa's life. He knew she had his number; truthfully, he only understood the words and not the profound inner meaning of all the teachings he could expound so brilliantly.

Today we've heard Jesus inviting Nathanael into a deeper relationship with him, promising Nathanael that he will see greater things than these. In the same way, he invites us to know him; not only through what we read and hear about him, not only through those outward appearances, but through the intimacy of a deep and trusting relationship with him.

Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, O Lord, by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name. *Amen.*