

Sermon- You Ain't Seen Anything Yet!

Scripture: John 1:43-51

Sunday, December 06, 2015

This will be the third Sunday that we will be looking at Jesus calling his group of 12 disciples. The first Sunday we saw Andrew and John's first interaction with Jesus. We saw Jesus transform them deeply in just one evening causing Andrew to be excited enough to call his brother Peter to Jesus. In Jesus' encounter with Peter, Jesus looks into his soul and clarifies his present and future identity. Today we will be looking at the calling of Philip and Nathanael.

Let's start with Philip. Now the only thing we see mentioned about this encounter is that Jesus found Philip and invited Philip to come follow him. Now if you were reading this casually, you could move passed this encounter and not think much of it. But the reality is that this very straightforward finding and invitation has some big theological implications we need to consider. You see the language that we use to describe spiritual journeys tends to be very human centric. We say, he found Christ or she found Christ at so and so age. This is of course the human perspective. But the problem with that kind of language is that it does not communicate properly what really happened. For one Jesus Christ was never lost that he had to be found by anyone. We are the one's who are lost and it is Christ who finds us. If you are actually paying attention and thinking about this, you would say there is a big problem with this logic. If Christ is the one who is doing the finding then you will ask, why is anybody lost at all. After all Christ is not limited to where he can look, right? Yes it is true, Christ is omnipresent. In fact he is the omnipresent Shepherd who is always next to you even in your lost state. But the problem is that people are not sheep. So when the Shepherd comes upon a lost soul they don't recognize the sheep and decide to follow instantly. It is more like the shepherd looking for sheep but instead finds a stubborn donkey in some cases or in other cases a badger or a wolf who would do everything to resist the Shepherd. So when an individual decides to become a disciple, what it means is that this disciple has decided to respond to the Christ Shepherd like a sheep who recognizes the voice of their shepherd. All humans are God's creation and rightfully belong to him. When they go astray they are lost from Christ's perspective. That moment of decision starts with an opening of the eyes and the sheep recognizes its shepherd. This is exactly what happened when Christ found Philip and said, "Come follow me". At that moment Christ found a sheep, a sheep called Philip.

We now come to Nathanael. Before we get into the details of the story we need to clarify a few things about this disciple named Nathanael. While Philip is mentioned in every listing of the 12, when it comes to this highly praised disciple called Nathanael, he is only mentioned in John's Gospel. So what's going on here? Well in John's Gospel, Nathanael is mentioned as Philip's buddy who came from his home town of Bethsaida. Now in the other Gospels, Philip is always being paired with another disciple by the name Bartholomew. And there is no instance where Bartholomew and Nathanael are mentioned together. It is either one or the other. So when you pull all these facts together the general consensus is that Nathanael and Bartholomew are really the same person. When the synoptics talk about him they refer to him as Bartholomew and when John's Gospel talks about him he is called Nathanael.

OK let's get back onto the scene now. You see Philip got excited about Jesus and immediately goes and tells his friend Nathaniel about his discovery of the Messiah who comes from Nazareth. At first Nathanael is not impressed because being a Bible scholar himself he does not know of any prophesy linking the coming Messiah to Nazareth. That is why he is shocked at his friend's enthusiasm about someone from Nazareth and so he exclaims very honestly, "Nazareth, can anything good come from Nazareth?" Now Philip at this point realizes that there is way more to Jesus than Nathanael realizes. But he does not try to argue the point. He simply tells his friend "come and see for yourself". Now Nathaniel's relationship with Philip is strong enough that when his friend tells him to come and see he is willing to come and see, for friendship sake.

That brings us to the encounter that Nathanael has with Jesus. You see the moment Jesus sees Nathanael he gives him an incredible complement, saying "here is a genuine son of Israel- a man of complete integrity". Quite a contrast to when Andrew and John approached him and he responding by saying, "what do you want?" In this case Jesus does not test Nathanael but instead complements him. Now this comes as quite a shock to Nathanael who asks him, "how do you know me?" To that Jesus' reply is rather incredible. He says, "even before Philip found you I saw you under the fig tree". Now you will say, what does that mean? Well, firstly, the opening phrase, the genuine son of Israel, is a very interesting phrase where Jesus is drawing a direct contrast between Nathanael and Jacob the grandson of Abraham who was a deceiver by nature. Now you see, God had transformed Jacob's heart after he wrestled with God all night and gave him a new name, 'Israel' which means- 'one who struggles with God'. So God's desire is for his people to engage with him in a very deep way. This engagement is what makes God's people, God's people. Now when Jesus sees Nathanael he sees someone who is a

person of great integrity who has also spent many hours wrestling with God in his mind about all kinds of issues. Just like when Jesus encountered Peter, Jesus was looking right into Nathanael's soul and said, "I saw you under the fig tree". In those days it was a custom for Rabbi's and students of the Torah to sit under a fig tree and study the word. So sitting under the fig tree was a phrase that Jesus used to communicate the fact that Jesus was aware of Nathanael's engagement and even struggles with the Word of God.

This does it for Nathanael and he declares Jesus to be the "Son of God and King of Israel". Now to be sure this declaration although marking a turning point for Nathanael, it hardly represents a full understanding of who Jesus was, simply because Jesus had not revealed who he was to anyone yet. But when you are a disciple of Jesus you really learn way more about Jesus than anyone else. And that is why Jesus' response to Nathanael's declaration is, "you believed because I said I saw you under the fig tree? Well, you ain't seen anything yet son! You ain't seen anything yet. As my disciple you are going to see all heaven open up and the angels of God going up and down on the Son of Man". Wow at this point Nathanael may have been pretty close to falling down from this revelation. But first, let me explain the meaning of this image that Jesus is using. You see Jesus knew that Nathanael knew his scripture well and would have immediately recognized that Jesus was communicating something about himself using a fascinating dream that Jacob had way back in Gen chapter 28. As the story goes, Jacob is on this journey to Padan Arram to find a wife according to his father's wishes. Somewhere on his journey at nightfall he rests his head on a stone and goes to sleep and has the most amazing dream. In that dream he sees a staircase that has one end anchored to the ground and the other end in Heaven. All along the staircase he sees angels of God are going up and down. At the top of the staircase is God himself who is reiterating the promise to Jacob that he made to his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac. This event happened approximately 2000 BC. Which means at the time of Jesus' encounter with Nathanael, Jesus is telling Nathanael that he is going to understand the full meaning of Jacob's dream 2000 years ago and he is going to understand that Jesus who is standing before him is that staircase between Heaven and earth where God's angels will travel on. "Believe me" Jesus tells Nathanael "you have not seen anything yet."

What you are seeing in this encounter with Nathanael is something the Gospel's have not had the opportunity to describe with Jesus's first encounters with other disciples. What you are seeing is Jesus pushing the limits of Nathanael's imagination to reveal who he is. Let me explain. You see the first disciples followed Jesus because they quickly realized that Jesus was the Messiah who the scriptures had predicted would come. But the best conception of the Messiah figure their imaginations could come up with was

someone who possibly had the miraculous powers of Elijah and the administrative skills of David or Solomon. And when you look at scripture again the person who fits the bill is someone like Moses. Now you have to appreciate this, for a Jewish person to believe that the person standing in front of them was someone of the caliber of Moses was about the biggest leap that their minds could make. So when Nathaniel calls Jesus, “the Son of God and King of Israel” in his mind he is thinking of a Moses or David like figure. Historically “Son of God” was a common title for a ruler. Julius Caesar was called “Son of God” and even the Kings of Israel were referred to as “sons of God”. So Nathaniel was thinking of Jesus more as future ruler of Israel, maybe even someone as great as Moses himself. But Jesus tells Nathaniel, “if that is who you see me as buddy you have not seen anything. Because” Jesus says, “what you are going to see as you follow me is that I am actually the perfect embodiment of humanity”. Now that is what the Son of Man phrase is trying to communicate. Jesus says, “I am the perfect embodiment of humanity who is also the one and only staircase between Heaven and Earth”. Jesus says, “I am the bridge between an the impossible gap. The tower that humans have been trying to build from the time of Babel”. Jesus is telling Nathanael, you will see eventually that, “on me you can walk up directly into the presence of God”. “You will also see that I am the stairway that God’s angels use to access the earth.” In other words Jesus tells Nathanael, “You will see that, I am the one and only bridge between heaven and earth. Try to get your mind around this Nathaniel. Believe me, if you thought you understood who I was, you have not seen anything yet.”

Now I want to bring this to our lives. You might be thinking how is getting a deeper understanding of Jesus related to discipleship. You see it is all about obedience. There are two qualities that people need if they are going to be obeyed. Importance and closeness. In other words, you only obey people who are important to you right? If a random stranger were to call you on the phone and ask you to go somewhere would you do it? I don’t think so. But what if your mother or spouse called you and told you to do the same thing. Would you do it? Most likely. So the more important the person is to you the more likely you are to obey them and the closer they are to you, the bigger the sacrifice you would be willing to make for them, right? If you step back to look at Christianity in the US you find that 70% of the people in the US call themselves Christian. But when you measure things like infidelity or materialism or other things that God wants people to do, you don’t find a very significant difference between the group who consider themselves Christian and the non-Christian group. Now if you were to examine the situation the reason for this apparent disobedience to the Word of God by people who consider themselves Christian is that these people are missing both the proximity to God and an personal awareness of the greatness of Jesus Christ. So people think they

believe but at a practical level they really don't think of Christ as someone who is closer to them and more powerful than other people in their lives. When Jesus calls disciples what he is really doing is inviting you to hang out with him so that you can get to know Him intimately and experience his closeness and awesomeness. Some people experience the closeness and awesomeness of Christ through deathbed healings. There is a Nepali pastor called Reuben Dayali who some of you heard at the Paths to Peace conference at the Sanctuary of Hope. Now when you experience Christ's power in this was it is not difficult to obey which Christ tells you to do something like this. Of course a deathbed healing is not the only way to experience Christ. But this much is for sure. The best way to experience the power of Christ is by walking closely with Christ as his disciple. This is what the Nathanael encounter means to all of us. This personal contact with God, gives you an awareness of how important Jesus is to you. The more real Jesus Christ is to you the more you will be willing to follow him. There is an ancient tradition that says that Apostle Bartholomew went to India. In fact it says he ministered in a place called Kalyan very close to where Sufi and I grew up. The tradition says he then went to the North of India and from there he went to Armenia and was martyred there. Some say he was crucifixion upside down, others say he was flayed alive. You may never be called to do these things but the fact is that the more you see the power and proximity of Christ, the more faithful a disciple you will be.

So today, I want you to hear Christ's words to Nathanael and Christ's words to you. Christ is telling you today, that if you thought you knew who he was, you have not seen anything yet. Christ is telling you today, "Follow me and you are going to have the adventure of your life". Let us pray.