

Second Sunday of Epiphany – January 14, 2018, Year B

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: John 1:43-51

“Something Great Did Come Out of Nazareth!”

Have you ever been surprised when you meet people who have something in common with you? Maybe it is a place, or a person what you have in common. Several of the Apostles were from the same place - Phillip, like Andrew and Peter, is from Bethsaida, on the Sea of Galilee. Well, Philip comes to Nathanael and is all excited and maybe even out of breath. Picture somebody who might be rambling something, and you are struggling to hear what is being said. Nathanael, (who is also known as Bartholomew - son of Tolome) can't believe what Philip is saying to him. Philip is bubbling over with the best news he has ever been able to share with anyone. He says that he has found the one that Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – He is talking about Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph! Nathanael's response has never been forgotten. *“Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?”*

Why Nathanael was so skeptical? Did he know something that Philip didn't? Well, Nazareth was not considered a very significant place – and was not thought to be the ‘garden spot of the Galilee region.’ It is situated inside a bowl on top of the Nazareth Ridge - north of the Jezreel Valley. Nazareth was a pretty isolated village in the time of Jesus with a population less than two hundred – and it was about the size of a football field. Even with such small numbers Nazareth was overpopulated. It wasn't rich in natural resources like water and fertile soil. It was a place of relative poverty. But there is another reason for his answer – Nathanael (or Bartholomew) comes from Cana, as John tells us in John 21, which is a neighboring town in the Galilee region. Maybe there is a little hometown rivalry going on? Think of how Coffee County just recently felt about Lee County after a certain championship football game – or even Alabama after this past Monday!

Nazareth is not mentioned at all in the Old Testament, and so there is no prophecy linking the Messiah with Galilee, or with Nazareth. Nothing special was ever expected to come from Nazareth ... and certainly not the Messiah!

So when Nathanael gets up to follow Philip he goes without expecting anything too special from this one the “prophets wrote about.” Imagine Nathanael's surprise when he sees Jesus and Jesus immediately says: *“Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.”* Nathanael asks *“How do you know me?”* Jesus responds to him *“I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”* Can you imagine how puzzled Nathanael must be? He has got to be thinking -how in the world does this man know me? I think an answer can be found in Psalm 139:7-10 *“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” “If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.” “If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,” “even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.”* God desires to be where we are – to meet us wherever we maybe – and so He sent His Son to be “God with us” – Emmanuel!

I think the real answer to Nathanael's wondering is because Jesus is God; He knows our hearts!

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When Nathanael walked up to Jesus, Jesus could have said, “I know you. You are the person who thought nothing good can come out of Nazareth - but He didn’t. Instead Jesus focused on something completely different. It was strange to find real faith ... to find true Israelites ... in the days of Jesus. But Nathanael was different. Jesus knew that here was a man in whom there was nothing false. As a true Israelite Nathanael didn’t just read the Word of God, but he lived it. He was a man who loved and feared God, he was a man of integrity.

That is why Jesus continues to describe him as one in whom there is nothing false. What a huge compliment, a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false, especially when it comes directly from the mouth of the Son of God.

In the days of Jesus, the fig-tree symbolized fruitfulness and spiritual fullness – later on it became a symbol of Israel itself. When Jesus says I saw you under the fig-tree He is pointing to the fact that Nathanael was a man who desired a closer walk with the Lord. When you were “*under the fig tree*” you were in a place of reflection, study, and meditation; a place where people expressed their heart of hearts to God.

- They expressed their joys, but also their sorrows;
- their victories, but also their failures;
- their confidence, but also their doubts.

To be under the fig-tree meant expressing your relationship with God. Nathanael is overcome and declares "*Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.*" (John 1:49) God gave Nathanael insight to see Jesus as He truly is. Now Jesus gives him a promise of things to come in His presence.

Jesus then told Nathanael "*I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.*" (John 1:51) Jesus called to mind the account of Jacob’s ladder – in which Jacob, also known as Israel “*had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.*" (Genesis 28:12) Jacob called that place “Beth El” which means “House of God.” Bethel became one of the greatest sanctuaries in all of Israel – with the thought that when you worshipped God in His house He is really present, with His angels going up and coming down to link heaven and earth. I think it is important to tell you that a great deal of John’s Gospel has to do with the way that Jesus fulfills the promises made concerning God’s Temple – and how He goes beyond them, bringing a new way in which God Himself can be present with His people. In the beginning of John’s Gospel he reveals the truth that "*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*" (John 1:14) The word “*dwelling*” is associated with the presence of God “tabernacling” or “pitching His tent” in the midst of His people – giving His covering to those He loves. The Tabernacle in the wilderness at the time of the Exodus, is where God’s presence dwelt among His people – in the Holy of Holies. God led His people in the wilderness as a pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. This carried forward to the Temple in Jerusalem where God’s presence was promised. Jesus is telling Nathanael not to just expect one or two remarkable acts, like when I showed you I knew about

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you before you even appeared to me, standing by the fig tree, but what you will see from now on is the reality of which Jacob's ladder, and even the Temple itself were pointing –just like a flashing neon sign!

Jesus was promising that if Nathanael follows Him – he will see what it looks like when heaven and earth are open to each other. He wasn't promising that he would see angels, but he would see things happen which show that they are there!

The promise is clear – when you are with Jesus, it is as though you are in the “House of God,” the Temple itself, with God's angels coming and going, and God's very own presence right there beside you.

For each one of us – we can be like Nathanael, “*under the fig-tree*” with all your faults; with all your sin; with all your doubts and questions. Even with all of that - you can still be a disciple – a follower of Jesus, because something great did come out of Nazareth – Jesus the Son of God, “The Way, The Truth and The Life” and He is “God with us” – He is “Emmanuel.”