

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: John 1:43-51

***“Something Good”***

Great things come from the strangest places. Phillip, like Andrew and Peter, is from Bethsaida, on the Sea of Galilee, and he comes to Nathanael all excited. I would think he must have come running, and all out of breath! Nathanael (who is also known as Bartholomew – bar Tolome or 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. 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?”*

Do you wonder why Nathanael is so skeptical? Well, it's because Nazareth was not considered a very significant place. The town is situated inside a bowl on top of the Nazareth ridge north of the Jezreel Valley. Nazareth was a relatively 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. There weren't a great deal of natural resources such as water and fertile soil and it was a place of relative poverty. It was located about 3 1/2 miles south of the Pagan city of Sepphoris – a city with Greek and Roman roots, a bustling cosmopolitan area. The people of Nazareth may have gone and worked in Sepphoris, and it has been suggested that Joseph may have worked there doing contracting work as a craftsman. Nazareth definitely took an economic “back seat” to Sepphoris and other parts of the northern Galilee. There is another reason – Nathanael (or Bartholomew) comes from Cana, as John tells us in John 21, which is a neighboring town in the Galilee region. Could it be that maybe there is a little hometown rivalry going on?

That is a physical description of Nazareth. Spiritually it was pretty insignificant as well. Nazareth is not mentioned at all in the Old Testament. There is no prophecy linking the Messiah with Galilee, much less with Nazareth. It was not known for great minds or great abilities. Nothing special was ever expected to come from Nazareth ... most certainly not the Messiah!

So when Nathanael gets up to follow Philip he goes without expecting anything too special from this so called “Messiah.” You can just 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 *“I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”* Can you imagine how puzzled Nathanael must be? He must be thinking - how in the world does this man know me? Part of the answer can be found in the Scriptures: listen to 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!

Nathanael must have been asking himself “How does this man know me?” Simple - because He is God; He knows our hearts! 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! Jesus could have said that - but he didn’t. Instead Jesus focuses on something completely different. You see, at the time, Jesus wasn’t the only one who was a great person coming out of a strange place. At the time many people in Israel did not understand what real faith was. Everyone was claiming to have a religion ... but it was a religion in name only.

- They offered sacrifices of repentance; but were not willing to change their lives.
- They came to the temple to worship; but it was a hollow ritual.
- In public they were holy; in private they were ungodly.
- Circumcision meant they looked like Israelites; but their hearts were far from God.

It was strange to find real faith ... to find true Israelites ... in the days of Jesus. But Nathanael was different. Here is a true Israelite in whom there is 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, a man of integrity. His heart gave a singular testimony to God.

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.

You see 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

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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. This thought should take us back to something I taught about this past Wednesday night – the Tabernacle in the wilderness at the time of the Exodus, in which 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 you before you even appeared to me, standing by the fig tree, but what you will see from now on is the reality toward which Jacob's ladder, and even the Temple itself were pointing – 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 this – 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 is 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. You can still be a disciple - 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 - Emmanuel.