

Nokesville UMC Sunday Worship [2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany]  
January 17, 2021  
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When you are thirsty...  
John 1:43-51

(1)

After being baptized, Jesus was proclaimed that He is the Son of God. And then, He started His public ministry as the Son of God. First, He selected His disciples one by one. According to the Gospel of John, the first disciple was Andrew, who was a brother of Simon Peter. And Andrew came to his brother Peter and said, “We have found the Messiah” (1:41), and brought him to Jesus. Jesus called Peter Cephas.

The next day, Jesus went to Galilee and found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” For Philip, he had a very close friend. Both Philip and his friend had a passion for the Word of God, so they earnestly studied the Old Testament scriptures, deeply meditated on them, and constantly prayed, waiting for the Messiah who was revealed in the Old Testament. His friend’s name was Nathanael who is the key figure.

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According to the Lectionary schedule, we read the Gospel of John 1:43-51. The passage describes the meeting moment between Jesus and Nathanael, and shows how he changed his mind and followed Jesus.

After meeting Jesus, Philip wanted to introduce his friend to Jesus, just like Andrew did with his brother Peter. So, he came to Nathanael who was under a fig tree and said, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth” (v. 45). However, Nathanael had read and studied the Old Testament for a long time, so he knew that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, not Nazareth (Micah 5:2). Well, only few people knew that Jesus was born in Bethlehem at the time. Thus, Nathanael might not have believed Jesus, a son of a carpenter from Nazareth, the Messiah. Here is his response: “Nazareth! Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (v. 46). In spite of his skeptical response, Philip told him to “come and see”; and he finally came to Jesus.

Seeing Nathanael coming toward Him, Jesus said, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” (v. 47). Nathanael might have been embarrassed because he had never met Jesus before. So, he asked, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you” (v. 48). Here is his dramatic interchange in his mind and spirit saying, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (v. 49). And Jesus finally responded to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (v. 51).

Here, I am somewhat perplexed about Nathanael’s sudden change. He never experienced or witnessed Jesus’s miracles such as healing, feeding, exorcising, and others. He just exchanged some words with Jesus—“You are a truly honest man.” “How do you know me?” “I saw you sitting under the fig tree.” “You are the Son of God, King of Israel.” I wasn’t able to accept Nathanael’s change through these four sentences of conversation. So, my spiritual struggle started.

(3)

In order to understand the situation, we need some logical assumptions with the words—fig tree and a true Israelite—in the text. First, the shadow under the fig tree was a special place for Nathanael. It was a place for his spiritual discipline. He used to sit under the fig tree for meditations on the Old Testament scriptures and prayers. I assume that he read and studied the story of Jacob in Genesis and meditated on the story under the fig tree. His mind, soul, and spirit were overwhelmed by the story of Jacob. In deep meditation and prayer, his friend suddenly ran to him and broke his meditation and prayer.

Second, Jesus said to Nathanael, “...truly an Israelite with no deceit.” A true Israelite without deceit? Out of the blue? Well, it was literally true. Nathanael was known to be an honest and faithful Israelite. But here, I assume, Jesus wanted to touch his spirit with the story of Jacob that Nathanael read and meditated on. Nathanael knew that Jacob and his life were full of deceit. He deceived his brother Esau and gained his brother’s birthright. He deceived his father Isaac and intercepted his brother’s blessings. But after he met and wrestled with the angel of the Lord, his whole being was changed. At that moment, he was given a new name—Israel. Israel and his life afterward held no deceit. Comparing Nathanael with Jacob (Israel), Jesus recognized him and praised his faithfulness and honesty.

After Nathanael admitted that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and the King of Israel, Jesus said to him that he will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. The angels of God ascending and descending...? Do you remember Jacob’s story in the wilderness at night? He dreamed that “there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it” (Genesis 28:12). Jesus kept touching Nathanael, who was studying the story of Jacob.

(4)

The more he read, the more he studied, the more he meditated, and the more he prayed, the more he became thirsty in his spirit for the Truth. In this state, he met Jesus; and after some words, he recognized Him as the Messiah. His thirst for the Spirit and Truth made him open his eyes and see Jesus for Who He is. Jesus is always there in the past, present, and future. And we will find and see Him when we are thirsty in our spirit for the Truth, and Jesus will quench our thirst.

A man whose name was Nathanael! Jesus called him and he followed. We all remember the disciple Peter’s profession about Jesus saying, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). His profession came after he spent time with Jesus. But Nathanael had the same profession of faith to Jesus saying, “You are the Son of God, King of Israel” as soon as he saw Jesus. And as Jesus said, he saw heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man when Jesus died on the cross and ascended into heaven. You may be curious that his name is not on the list of the 12 disciples. It is traditionally known that Nathanael is Bartholomew, an unsung but honest and faithful disciple and apostle who delivered Jesus in India and Armenia in the first century, was persecuted by peeling skin, was martyred, and was thrown into the sea.

What are you thirsty for? Here is a simple way to figure out your thirst: “What do you ask when you pray to God?” Are they your desires? Our physical desires will cover our eyes and make us not see Jesus even though He is very near. But if we thirst in our spirit, others’ spirit, and seek the way of truth and the way of life, we will find that Jesus is always with us. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Amen.