

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 139: 1-6; 13-18
SECOND LESSON: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20
January 17, 2021

“You Know Who We Are”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

We’re not given much detail in John’s gospel about the call of the apostles. In just a few short sentences Jesus decides to leave for Galilee, finds Philip, and calls him to follow him. Philip was from Bethsaida, the same town Andrew and Peter came from. Bethsaida was located at the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee near the region called the Decapolis, which literally means “ten cities.” These were ten Greek cities east of the Jordan River, which might explain why these men had Greek names. Not that the average American even knows that these were Greek names, but the world of Jesus was decidedly bilingual, or even tri-lingual. People spoke Aramaic at home, Greek in business and studied Hebrew in the synagogue. Jesus would have known all three.

Despite the brevity of the description, it’s pretty clear reading through the lines that the first group of apostles knew each other. It was Philip who sought out Nathanael. He told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

“Nazareth!” said Nathanael, “Can anything good come from there?”
Philip didn’t argue. He just said, “Come and see.”

So what’s wrong with Nazareth? Is this like saying, “Camden? Can anything good come from Camden?” There are several possibilities: First of all, unlike Camden, Nazareth did not have a high crime rate and dilapidated housing. Nazareth was a tiny town of only 120 to 150 inhabitants. Literally everyone in the town was related to each other. It was off the beaten path. You had to intend to go to Nazareth. No one just passed through on their way somewhere else. Geographically Nazareth was set in a small basin surrounded by hills. It had a water supply, and limited terraced agriculture and pasture land. And it remained tiny until the middle of the 19th century when Christian tourists discovered it. To say someone came from Nazareth, then, might be more along the lines of saying they came a community of inbred ignorant hicks. Their local accent was so strong it was hard for those outside of the area to understand them. But politically Nazareth also didn’t have much going for it. The large Roman city of Sepphoris was only four miles away. When the Roman armory was robbed after Herod the Great died in 4 BCE the Romans retaliated by crucifying 2000 Jews. Who might have gotten the blame? The closest Jews outside of Sepphoris itself were in Nazareth. And when Jesus was a boy Judas the Galilean instituted a tax revolt, which resulted in another Roman crackdown during which many more were crucified. The perpetrators may or

may not have come from Nazareth, but again, Nazareth was the closest Jewish town. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” makes sense when we look at the whole picture.

Despite Jesus being from Nazareth, Nathanael came. And when Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”

Nathanael responded, “How do you know me?”

Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

Nathanael’s response to this seems excessive to us. He declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”

There is a lot in this brief exchange between Jesus and Nathanael that we don’t understand. On a superficial level it just sounds like Jesus saw Nathanael under a fig tree, and some do interpret it this way. But is that what’s really going on? This may well be a case where we’re dealing with an idiom. Taking some of our idioms literally could be highly hazardous to our health. Think about it: *Eat your heart out . . . Keep your eyes peeled . . . Lend me an ear . . . Can I pick your brain? And don’t forget . . . Break a leg!*

Traditionally to sit “under the fig tree” meant to be studying the Torah, because that was a place where Rabbis often gathered. But more specifically by the time of Jesus “under the fig tree” had become a Jewish idiom for studying the messianic prophecies. This comes from Micah 4:4, a messianic prophecy which says “Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the Lord Almighty has spoken.” Considering it this way it appears that Nathanael had been studying the messianic scriptures. This makes a lot of sense, because Philip went to him saying, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

A possible explanation for the **strength** of Nathanael’s reaction may be that Jesus referenced the second part of the scripture he had been studying, Isaiah 59: 3, which says, “He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, **nor was any deceit in his mouth.**” Jesus said, “Here truly is an Israelite **in whom there is no deceit.**” There is no way to actually know this, but it is a possible explanation for the intensity of Nathanael’s response.

Nathanael was unnerved by the fact that Jesus knew things about him that humanly speaking, he could not have known. Only God knows us this way. Psalm 139 says, “You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. . . Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely . . . For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” To be known in this way, to be truly, deeply and completely known by God is both terrifying and comforting at the same time.

God knows our hearts. God knows absolutely everything about us. Jesus knew everything about Nathanael, just as he knew everything about the woman at the well. The good and the bad are laid bare before God. And while we wait for the dust to settle after last week’s attack on the Capital and the FBI

to investigate, we recognize that God knows all about the people who were involved there too. Nothing is hidden from God. As we continue to pray for the safety of our nation and the protection of our democracy, we can pray for these people. They need our prayers! **Only God has the full picture** and ALL of us have developed belief systems built on shifting sand. We all have fears and biases. We all think we're right, and everyone else is wrong. Mercifully, God knows the truth.

Psalm 139 concludes with the words, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." Who among us has not had a lot of anxious thoughts right now? And whether we want to admit it or not, most people have at least some offensive ways. Jesus knew Nathanael, just as he knows us. The world may be in upheaval right now, but we are not facing it alone.

I close today with part of a prayer uttered on January 6th at the Capital by Rear Admiral Margaret Kibben right as it became clear they were under siege. It was her third day on the job as the new chaplain for the House of Representatives and she is a minister member of Philadelphia Presbytery. Rev. Kibben prayed, "O God, our refuge and our strength, a very present help in times of discord and trouble. Mountains crumble, waters rage, nations roar, and yet we need not be afraid, for even now You abide with us in these times of great discord, uncertainty, and unrest." Amen.

Psalm 139: 1-6; 13-18; 23-24

- ¹ You have searched me, Lord,
and you know me.
- ² You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
- ³ You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
- ⁴ Before a word is on my tongue
you, Lord, know it completely.
- ⁵ You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.
- ⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.
- ¹³ For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- ¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
- ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
- ¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed body;

all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.
17 How precious to me are your thoughts, God!
How vast is the sum of them!
18 Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand—
when I awake, I am still with you.
Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
24 See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

John 1:43-51

43 The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, “Follow me.”

44 Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. **45** Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

46 “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked. “Come and see,” said Philip.

47 When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”

48 “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

49 Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”

50 Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.” **51** He then added, “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.”