

“The Undercover King”

John 1:43-51

Series: *Love Came Down Week 3. Jesus the King*

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Who is this man? He appears in unexpected places wearing baffling disguises. Once he donned a fake white beard, a long robe and an Arabic headdress. At other times, he drove a taxi around the frantic city streets and posed as a reporter covering a story. He slipped unnoticed into government buildings and questioned bureaucrats. Is he a CIA operative? An undercover FBI agent? The real 007?

No. He is Abdullah II, King of Jordan. Since he was crowned in 1999, King Abdullah has occasionally changed his appearance and mingled among his subjects without his royal security. Once, while disguised as an old Arab man, he strolled around two of his own government buildings without being noticed. While waiting in a long line, he asked bystanders their opinions on how the king is leading the country. Now imagine mouthing off about “The foolish king who doesn’t know the first @#*&% thing about leading this &\$#@* country. I wish he was here right now so I could give him a piece of my mind.” Then suddenly you discover you got your wish. Why does he do it? King Abdullah II becomes one of them so he can better serve them. Apparently he also loves wearing costumes. He’s the only head of state to appear on Star Trek.

God came from beyond the farthest galaxies of Star Trek and, like King Abdullah, entered our neighborhood in disguise. When the King of the Universe spoke with the common people He also received an earful of harsh words like King Abdullah. 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.” “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked. John 1:45-46

Nathanael was from Cana which is next door to Nazareth. Like most neighboring towns, the people disliked each other. They probably played each other in football, called each other names, stole each other’s mascots. Nathaniel could see the Messiah, the King of Israel, coming from Bethlehem or Jerusalem but never Nazareth. Nathanael was prejudiced. No nut from Nazareth was going to be his King.

In this message series “Love Came Down” we’ve looked at how Jesus is Prophet and Priest. Today we see how He is our King. *Christ* (which is not Jesus’ last name) is the Greek word for *Messiah* which, in Hebrew means, “Anointed One.” Before you become King you are anointed with oil. So most ancient people think Messiah or Christ means a King. Jesus is a Prophet like Moses, a Priest like Aaron and a King like David.

Today, many nations don’t want a King. Two hundred and fifty years ago we fought a war to get rid of the king. Next year, on July 4th, we’ll celebrate the Semiquincentennial of our nation’s birth. We’ve done just fine for 250 years without

a king. Like us, other nations have kicked out their kings. Kings can be tyrants. They force us to obey their arbitrary laws, charge us exorbitant taxes, fight their ridiculous wars. Like Nathanael, we reject kings coming from strange places. Why should we serve a king who was born two thousand years ago, in the depths of poverty, among a downtrodden people, in a distant village that doesn't appear on anyone's map? Why should we obey a king who never went to college, never governed a nation, never led an army, never wrote a word, and never had any money? "We don't need a king," most would say, "And if we did, it probably wouldn't be that one."

So why follow this King? He's the King who **Came to See Us**. Despite the mess we made of His world, God never gave up on us. He sent commandments – we broke them. He sent kings – they led His people astray. He sent priests – they perverted His temple. He sent prophets – we ignored them or, worse, killed them. Despite all our sin and rejection, God did not turn away from us. Why? Because, as John says, "God so loved the world" – this world with all its war, poverty, hate, injustice and sin – much of it created by the kings and governments of this world. Yet this time God would not send a representative or a substitute. Like King Abdullah II, the King of Heaven came among us disguised as a human being. "They will call him Immanuel" the angel said to Joseph, "which means, 'God with us.'" (Matthew 1:23).

We cannot imagine what it was like for God the Son to descend to earth. He gave up all His rights and privileges and became a peasant. He surrendered His glory and power and became a helpless babe. He traded His throne for a hay filled manger and the praise of angels for the murderous attack of Herod's soldiers. The One who was present in every time and place was now locked into a single spot and a single moment. The Giver of all food became hungry. The Lord and Owner of all things had no place to call home. The Creator of the Universe became tired working in a carpenter shop. The Holy One who never sinned dove into our sin-soaked world.

There is tremendous poverty in our world. Leith Anderson visited a mission that cares for people who live in the garbage dump in the Philippine capital Manila. Several years ago, I visited the Manila garbage dump and saw something beyond belief. Tens of thousands of people make their homes on that dump site. They construct shacks out of the things other people throw away. They send their children out early every morning to scavenge for food from other people's garbage. People are born, grow up have their families, finish out their lives, and die there without ever going anywhere else, even in the city of Manila. It is an astonishing thing. Missionaries also live on the garbage dump. They chose to leave their country and communicate the love of Jesus to people who would never hear it. That is amazing to me. People leave what we have to go and live on a garbage dump. Amazing, but not as amazing as the journey from heaven to earth. The Son of God made that journey. He knew what he was doing and where he was going. He knew what the sacrifice would be to save the human race.¹

The Son of God waded in up to His neck in our garbage. But why? Wouldn't it have been easier to send the heavenly host to swoop down and clean up our mess? Why subject yourself to birth, growing pains, acne, puberty, school, learning carpentry, dealing

¹ Leith Anderson, "A God's-Eye View of Christmas," Preaching Today #208

with parents, siblings, disgruntled customers? Some say God did that so He would know what it's like to be human, so He could understand us, appreciate our struggles and suffering. Perhaps, like King Abdullah II, God disguised Himself to listen to our opinions and concerns so He could govern us better.

Yet that can't be true. God knows us better than we know ourselves. He doesn't need us to teach Him what it means to be human, especially since we've made a mess of humanity. Nor does God need our opinion on how to run the universe since we've made a mess of our world. So why did He come as a helpless baby?

The key to unlocking that answer is right in plain sight. "God so loved the world He **SENT**"? No. God already sent prophets, priests, kings and angels. It's easy to send a letter, an email, a text, a messenger. You don't need to get directly involved. No, it doesn't say "sent." "God so loved the world He **GAVE** His only begotten Son." When you give, you hand over what belongs to you. And the best gifts are those which include a part of yourself in them. They are personal, meaningful and filled with love.

Other kings take from us – taxes, freedom, our lives. This King came to give Himself. He gave Himself to us fully. By the time Phillip introduced Nathanael to the Messiah, Jesus had already lived in crummy little Nazareth for 30 years. When most of us do mission work we drive over for a day to Trenton or Philly, maybe a week, ten days tops in Haiti, the Bahamas or the DR. When Jesus, our King, gave up everything to come and see us, He spent 90% of his life just living with us in such a humble way that those years left almost no record even in the Bible. Our King came to see us.

And that's why Jesus is the King who sees us. When Nathanael made his sarcastic remark about Nazareth, Philip simply said, "Come and see" (John 1:46). When we come and see Jesus, when we lay aside our prejudices and honestly open up to Him, He opens us up and helps us see ourselves the way He does.

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel." John 1:47-49

Talk about a turnaround. One minute Nathanael is trashing Jesus' hometown. Then, after a little flattery, Nathanael suddenly falls all over Jesus. What happened? What does Jesus mean when He says, "I saw you under the fig tree"? Fig trees are shady places where people pray and study God's Word. It's the place where you open your soul to God. Jesus looks past Nathanael's crusty cantankerous outside to see the person he truly is, the person he can become if he follows Jesus.

Centuries before God looked into the soul of a man named Jacob. He was a slippery, deceptive liar. He cheated his father, his brother, his uncle and ran away from all three of them. He even tried to run from God until the Lord grabbed him in a headlock and wrestled all night with him. Just before dawn, God gave this trickster a new name: Israel. It means "One who wrestles with God." Why did God bother with this deceiver? He could see into his soul. God knew He could make a nation out of him – the Kingdom of Israel. Though Israel would always try to wrestle, in God's arms he eventually stopped

deceiving and started blessing the world. In fact, God chose to be born into Israel's family. Now that same God, in human flesh, looked into Nathanael's soul and said, 'Here's another Israel who doubts and wrestles and grumbles. But I can see inside he is so much more than that. He is a true child of Israel with a heart that yearns for the truth.'

What keeps you from coming and seeing Jesus your King? Doubts? Deceptions? Despair? Depression? Disappointment? Desire? Discouragement? Disgust from your deeds? Jesus sees it all. You can't deceive Him anymore than Jacob could. Nothing is hidden from Him. But He also sees something you can't. He sees what you can become. He takes you, with all your brokenness, and makes you a blessing. He can make you part of a kingdom of love, joy and peace in this broken world – so long as you willingly come and see and follow your King. When you do, something greater happens.

We Invite Others to Come and See Him. After Nathanael called Him the Son of God and King of Israel, Jesus replied, Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." 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." John 1:50-51

Nathanael followed Jesus right to His hometown of Cana where Jesus performed His first miracle: changing water into wine. Nathanael watched Him feed five thousand, heal the sick, drive out demons, open blind eyes and even raise a man from the dead. All that was reason enough to follow this King. He was more powerful than divisions of soldiers, the scourge of disease, the laws of physics, the dark specter of death and all the hosts of hell.

Yet it was weakness not power that made Nathanael follow this King. Kings grab power by climbing over people. This King gave up His power and came down to live among the people. Kings force others to serve them. This King came not to be served but to serve. Kings conquer nations by killing people. This King conquered hearts in every nation by letting Himself be killed for our sins, by giving His life as a ransom for many.

Nathanael didn't see Jesus die on the Cross. When Jesus was arrested, he ran away like Jacob his ancient ancestor. Yet Nathanael also saw with his own eyes something old Jacob saw in a dream centuries before. He 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. There above it stood the Lord, and he said: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring." When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." Genesis 28:14-17 selected verses

After Easter, when Nathanael and the others visited the empty tomb he probably remembered what Jesus said when he first met Him three years before: "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man." John 1:51

Jesus is the stairway that leads to heaven. His empty tomb is the gateway to eternal life. No king on earth can ever offer that. So we must invite others to come and see Him just

as Philip invited Nathanael and Nathanael invited others in a chain reaction that reaches from the empty tomb all the way to us. For all who come to Jesus will see greater things.

Tim was a follower of Jesus who said to his friend, "Come and see." When Tim stopped by his friend's door to take him to worship, the friend resisted. "Maybe another time," he said. The friend was nervous about what would happen at church. What should he wear? What would people think of him? But Tim's friend came. What he found at the church was joy and love. People seemed happy as they sang to Jesus. After the first song Tim's friend realized the difference: God was there. Tim's friend wanted what they had.

Tim's friend started to change. But God was not done with him. Another friend named Carrie said, "Why don't you come to my church?" So he did. He followed his King Jesus. Ultimately he dedicated his life entirely to serve his King Jesus. He completely committed his life to inviting everyone to "Come and See" his King Jesus. Some of you know Tim's friend as Pastor Greg Penza.

I am convinced that I would not be a Pastor if those people did not invite me. I thank God this day for those life changing invitations.

Who can you invite to "Come and See" the King?