

Sermon, 2nd Epiphany, Year B, January 17, 2021, Jane A. Beebe

‘Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God!”’ (John 1:48-49)

I find today’s Gospel reading quite mysterious—and perhaps all the more compelling because of that mystery. In the exchanges between Jesus and Philip, and Jesus and Nathanael, so much happens, and yet so little detail is provided. Jesus goes to Galilee, finds Philip, and says, simply, “Follow me.” We can only infer that Philip follows because nothing of what Philip is thinking and feeling is described to us, (although the Gospel writer thought it worth noting where Philip was from). And yet something powerful must have happened between them because Philip goes and finds Nathanael.

Nothing is revealed about Philip’s prior relationship with Nathanael. Are they friends, perhaps part of the same worshipping community? Is Nathanael also a disciple of John the Baptist as were Simon Peter and Andrew? Intriguingly, the figure of Nathanael only appears in John’s Gospel. He is not listed as one of the twelve disciples. What was it about Nathanael that made Philip think of him first, having just become a new disciple of Jesus? In my imagination Philip is breathless from running after Nathanael and is panting a bit as he says, "We have found him

about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth!"

Then Nathanael gives his famous reply, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Again, in my imagination, Nathanael's eyebrows are raised. It seems likely that Nathanael is well-versed in the scriptural messianic prophecies. He expects the Messiah is to come from David's line, from Bethlehem, not a tiny village like Nazareth. Nazareth is mentioned *nowhere* in the Hebrew Bible—I checked! But Philip, echoing Jesus's words to Simon Peter and Andrew in the passage just before this one, says merely, "Come and see..."

In the text, we hear that Jesus "saw" Nathanael coming toward him. However, the Greek word used for "saw" goes deeper than mere visual perception. It suggests that Jesus *recognizes* Nathanael. It is as if Jesus only has to look at Nathanael to know who he is in his essential being. Jesus then makes this startling observation, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" The Greek word for deceit, *dolos*, has the sense of guile, or trickery. Jesus has seen that Nathanael is sincere, simple in the best sense, truthful. He is literally unadulterated like wine not mixed with water or unalloyed metal. There is a verse in Matthew 6 where Jesus says, "'The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light..." (Matthew 6:22) The King James version

has "...If therefore thy eye be single, thy whole body will be full of light..."

Perhaps it is people like Nathanael of whom Jesus is thinking.

Maybe shaken up a bit, Nathanael asks him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answers, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Again, the word for "saw" has the sense of knowing, of recognition. So far in this passage, geography, where someone is from, seems quite important in establishing one's identity, general importance, and even purpose. But when Nathanael asks Jesus, "Where?" Jesus replies not with a place name, but with something that sounds more like a dream or a vision: "I saw you under a fig tree..."

What a lovely image. (It seems God is always providing us with protective trees or bushes whether we want them or not. I think of Elijah and Jonah). There are several interpretations of what Jesus might mean by this. Traditionally rabbis would sit under a fig tree to offer their teachings and scriptural interpretations. Judges sat under trees to offer their wisdom and arbitrations. Perhaps Nathanael was a rabbi or a scribe. However, the fig tree has such rich meaning for the people of Israel, especially as it appears in the book of the prophet Micah, chapter 4:

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they

shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.”

Being “under the fig tree” means we are living in the world God has envisioned for us. This is God’s kingdom where there is abundance, justice, peace, and freedom from fear. Whatever Jesus means by it, it evokes a strong response in Nathanael, enabling him to say, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

A few years ago I had a routine medical procedure that required my being anesthetized briefly. (My recent visits to an orthopedist recalled this memory).

When I arrived for my appointment I was struck that each medical professional I encountered, the nurses, the anesthetist, the surgical assistant, and the doctor, first asked me my name and asked me to spell it: J-A-N-E B-E-E-B-E. They, in turn, told me their names. Each also asked me my date of birth: 11-15-1955. Finally, I was asked, “Why are you here?” Each time I was asked this question I responded obediently with the five-syllable name of the procedure—not so easy when one is a bit stressed and light-headed!

Later I began to think about how, considering the greater scheme of things, I might have answered that question. Why am I here? Under the circumstances, maybe a philosophical or theological discussion wasn’t called for. And yet there was something about the encounter with this medical team that stayed with me.

Each one of them smiled and looked me in the eye. They gave me their full attention, and made sure that they had mine as well. I was made to feel cared for and valued—even known. They were clearly exercising their calling; I, in turn, received the gift of greater health and wellbeing. Yet it was more than that. I left that day with an important question to ponder: “Why am I here?” It was the other side of Nathaniel’s question to Jesus, “Where did you get to know me?”

More even than Jesus’s alluding to the coming Kingdom, I believe it is Jesus’s loving, deeply knowing gaze that calls forth Nathanael’s confident response. Nathaniel is transformed because he has been seen and recognized. This is the gaze we encounter in Psalm 139 when the psalmist sings to God: “...You have searched me and known me... Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed...” Jesus tells Nathaniel, “I saw you... *before* Philip called you.” [Italics mine]. God beholds our “unformed substance” yet does not leave us in that state. When the psalmist says, “I am fearfully and wonderfully made...” the word “fearfully” could be translated “reverently.” God approaches us—and all of creation—with love and care. It is Jesus’s very presence that is powerful from the first days of his ministry.

