

**1 Samuel 3:1-10**  
**John 1:43-51**

**First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ**  
**Sunday, January 18, 2009**

### **Seeing With Eyes of Faith**

Several things happen in this brief and baffling text: the calling of Philip; Philip's invitation to Nathanael; the conversation between Philip and Nathanael; and the longer conversation between Jesus and Nathanael. On one level, at least, the second part of the passage seems to be almost an amusing anecdote. Nathanael, whose skepticism prompts him to doubt whether anything good can come from Nazareth, meets Jesus, who abruptly declares him to be free from deceit. Of course, in John's Gospel, stories often take place on more than one level simultaneously; and this story seems to fit that pattern.

The story opens in a way which connects it firmly with the narrative about John the Baptist, from earlier in John. The introduction and call of Philip connects back to the previous scene in which Andrew and Simon Peter are called. Philip's identification of Jesus in vs. 45 similarly recalls Andrew's claim about Jesus. The declaration that Jesus is "Him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote" generalizes John the Baptist's earlier statements about his own role as a messenger of Jesus.

In this instance, Jesus seeks out Philip, who comes from the same city as Andrew and Peter. As Jesus' ministry unfolds, much of it appears to be centered in Galilee.

In this story, Philip's proclamation of Jesus' identity is greeted with an amount of skepticism. Nathanael's comment, "Can anything good come out

of Nazareth?” may reflect some local rivalries; but it also provides the Gospel’s first fulfillment of John 1:10-11, “His own people did not accept Him.” Nathanael does not initially respond to this proclamation about Jesus.

The other disciples have either come to or are brought to Jesus, but Jesus finds Philip, who may not have had the power to come on his own. Philip seems to be an ordinary kind of person, at times actually in over his head. When Jesus asks him about feeding the five thousand, Philip’s answer is that there is very little money on hand, not even enough to buy a small amount for each person. Philip can only see how little there is. After following Jesus through all the experiences of His ministry, Philip still says, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.”

Yet Jesus singles out Philip and pursues him, an ordinary person like so many of us. Jesus invites him, “Follow Me,” which means not just to start out, but to continue following Him. How encouraging for those of us who may be shy, feeling we have so little to offer. Possibly we are the ones Christ seeks most eagerly.

It almost seems as though Philip is waiting for this invitation. He accepts on the spot and immediately finds Nathanael. Godet says it this way, “One lighted torch serves to light another.” Every study of evangelistic outreach reveals that 85% or more of all converts or new disciples, are brought to Christ by someone they trust – a member of the family, a neighbor, a close friend, or a business associate. In addition, the most spontaneous, authentic witnessing takes place in the first two years of Christian experience. Philip seems to follow this pattern. Nathanael trusts Philip and his joyful witness,

“We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph!”

Apparently, Philip is already a part of a small company of new disciples when he shares the Good News with his friend, Nathanael. We know very little about Nathanael, a name which means “God has given.” John is the only gospel in which his name appears. However, some guess he could have also been known by the name Bartholomew.

Surely Philip and Nathanael have frequently discussed the witness of Moses and the prophets concerning the coming of the Messiah. It is from this kind of common talk and wondering that Philip identifies for Nathanael the One to whom he has given his allegiance, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. Up to this point, there has been little opportunity for anyone to become aware of Christ’s miraculous birth, and it is common to identify a person by the head of the house.

The mention of Nazareth brings a skeptical response out of Nathanael. How can the promised One come out of a little, non-descript village like Nazareth? There seems to have been a competitive spirit between Nathanael’s hometown, Bethsaida, and Nazareth. Certainly, the Messiah deserves to be from a town better than Nazareth.

None of this seems to bother Philip, and he issues the familiar invitation we have heard before, “Come and see!” What amazing doors this kind of investigation can open. These are a few of the circumstances when Jesus identifies Nathanael, not only as a fellow countryman and an Israelite, but

also his deeper character, his hidden self. Only Jesus can do this. Here Jesus sees a man in whom there are no hidden motives, no deceit. Nathanael seems to be transparent.

The meeting between Jesus and Nathanael prompts guessing as to why Jesus says there is no deceit in Nathanael. The answer to this remains mostly hidden which seems to indicate it is not too important. Instead, Nathanael asks Jesus how Jesus knows him. Christ answers with another puzzling statement, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” In John’s Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as often knowing things not yet known by others, things normally not accessible by human beings.

No wonder Nathanael is surprised. Nathanael wants to know how Jesus is able to discern and understand his deepest self. When Jesus speaks of Nathanael’s being under the fig tree, Christ is describing a place of thoughtful meditation. Here Jesus is again seen as having penetrating insight, as we are able to see when Christ calls Simon who is now called Peter. We want to remember this is how Christ also sees us.

Nathanael’s response to Christ seeing him under the fig tree is to declare to Christ, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Ironically, what Nathanael now confesses is far more specific and far more grand than the proclamation of Philip. Nathanael does not remain with those who will not “know” or “accept” Christ; instead, he joins those who receive Christ.

Roger Fredrikson, a Biblical scholar, says Nathanael’s response is a cry of allegiance. Nathanael claims Jesus is his “Rabbi,” a title of respect which

only a disciple would use. Nathanael is submitting himself to Jesus Christ as his teacher. He also calls Christ “the Son of God.” There is a good chance Nathanael does not completely understand the full implication of calling Christ a rabbi, but he seems to sense Jesus stands in an unusual relationship to God. He also calls Jesus the King of Israel, another unusual title, but this seems to indicate Nathanael is surrendering to Jesus as his own king.

For these reasons, Nathanael becomes the first one to believe in Christ when He asks, “Do you believe?” Jesus indicates Nathanael will be given far deeper grounds for belief than others. As Jesus’ ministry develops, Nathanael will see mighty works as well as great and wonderful surprises, all which reveal the glory of God.

Nathanael is not mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock, Biblical scholars, say they can find no valid reason to link Nathanael with Bartholomew, as others do, in order to match up John’s list of disciples with those of the other Gospel writers. But John thinks it is important to include him

The theme of accepting or rejecting Jesus also occupies a place of importance in the Gospel of John, as John demonstrates where the people Jesus encounters are encouraged to make a judgment about Him. John seems to have little tolerance for refusal or unwillingness to make a decision. Nathanael’s change from skeptical rejection to affirmation of faith separates him from those who want to occupy some non-existent middle ground.

The time is now come when grace is fulfilled. Jesus truly is the “House of God.” Jesus Christ is the place of meeting with God the Father, not only for

Nathanael and Philip and those first disciples, but also for all who believe. To them, Christ becomes the very “gate of heaven,” because it is through the life and ministry of the Word made flesh that all the resources of heaven are available to all believers.

In Christ’s own invitation to “Come and see,” we are given the opportunity to learn who Christ is in our own experience as echoed in the disciples’ invitation to others. In becoming a disciple of Jesus, Nathanael does not abandon his Bible or his ancestral faith, but is a true Israelite. So he declares Jesus to be Son of God and King of Israel, titles equivalent to Messiah.

One of the themes of John’s Gospel is that faith in Jesus Christ based on his miraculous signs alone is not complete. Christ’s signs are meant to point to the greater reality of the presence of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the bridge between heaven and earth, the place where God is revealed. Christ is the bridge between God and humanity.

John the Gospel writer gives us a large and varied understanding of who Jesus is. His Gospel defines and gives substance to all the titles listed in the prologue.

Yet, Jesus calls Himself simply, “the Son of Man,” which is His most common way of identifying Himself. This title is not associated with any particular Messianic expectation, nor is there an emphasis in its use. There is a freshness, an openness about “the Son of Man.” Listeners can give this title whatever meaning they want.

In this first reference to Himself, Christ makes His humanity evident. He is one of us. This is where love brings Him. Here He lives, shares Himself, and finally suffers and dies. Only in this way can the door to heaven be opened for our salvation, which runs all through John's Gospel.

Jesus is not only "Son of Man," but He is also "the Son of Man." In Christ we see what God intends for each of us in creation. Christ is our role model and our pattern. Even though we follow and squander our destiny in angry disobedience, God does not and will not give up on us. Jesus brings the possibility of a new creation. We see in "the Son of Man" what we can become. Christ is the finished product. He is what it means to be truly human.

According to Charles Cousar, another scholar, this passage is also the bridge from the testimony of John the Baptist to the stories about Jesus' ministry. In the following passages, John the evangelist and Gospel writer describes "greater things than these" and draws attention to the One who moves from heaven to earth and again from earth to heaven. One of the challenges to John's readers is whether we will see Christ with Nathanael's initial skepticism or with Nathanael's eyes of faith.

When Jesus speaks of Himself as "the Son of Man" throughout the Gospel, it is sometimes clouded over with end-of-the-world meanings. But here, Jesus Christ simply says, "As the Son of Man I stand on your side. I am with you."

Christ calls us each and asks us to respond using our and Nathanael's eyes of faith. We have no reason to doubt Christ's presence in our lives. He is always with us. Christ wants us to use Him as our role model, to witness to others of His life of love and His death on the Cross to save us from our sin. Let us reach out to Christ, accept Him, and welcome Him into our beings and into our lives. May we live more Christ-like lives in sharing with others, to help them learn more about Christ and how wonderfully He can change our lives. May our eyes of faith be opened, and may we truly see Christ by using our eyes of faith. Amen.