John 1:43-51

43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’ 44Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.’ 46Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ 47When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’ 48Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ 49Nathanael replied, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ 50Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’ 51And he said 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.

“Called to Follow”

Do you notice the difference between Philip and Nathanael? These two guys are like Tigger and Eyore. Philip seems joyful about anything. To Philip, Jesus simply says, “Follow me,” and Philip follows. He’s like that friendly dog that you meet on the street; you just say, “Hello,” and he’s your best friend, your #1 fan. He follows you everywhere. It doesn’t take him long to realize that Jesus is the right guy, the one “about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote.”

Nathaniel, on the other hand, seems to be a skeptic. He responds to his friend’s excitement with the deflating comment, “Nazareth? Can anything good come from Nazareth?” Bang! What a bomb to throw at Philip. In so many words Nathanael tells his friend, “Jesus is not the guy. No need to get excited.”

Philip seems unphased; to Nathanael’s lament, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” Philip just replies, “Come see!”

I don’t know if Philip and Nathanael were really that different; Philip had presumably spent a little time with Jesus, and that may account for his excitement and he fact that his friend’s doubts did not discourage him. What’s fascinating to me is how quickly Jesus turned Nathanael’s doubt into belief; one minute Nathanael says “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” The next he’s declaring to Jesus *of Nazareth,* “You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Here, perhaps, a little explanation is in order – Jesus didn’t just do one of those Jedi mind bending tricks with Nathanael.” So let’s set the scene; a little fishing town in Israel, 30 A.D. This was a time of expectation: Israel had been an occupied nation for over 700 years. It’s religion had been corrupted. And as so many good zealous Christians today anxiously and prayerfully await the return of Jesus Christ, Nathanael, as a “true Israelite” would have been praying for a savior. It’s significant that Jesus saw him “under the fig tree”; according to Jewish writings, the fig tree was known to be an ideal place to pray and to study scripture. And according to author Michael Card, the religious teachers of that day who believed in the coming of the messiah made such prayer their priority: 'he who, when he prays, does not pray for the coming of the Messiah, has not prayed at all.’ If Nathanael was an avid student of scripture, he would have expected that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, not Nazareth, hence his comment on nothing good coming from Nazareth may have been something beside a regional prejudice. If we understand Nathanael to be a “true Israelite” in Jesus’ eyes who is seen “under the fig tree, presumably praying or studying scripture, and if praying, praying for the coming Savior, IT WOULD MAKE SENSE THAT Nathanael would recognize Jesus, the one who amazingly saw him under the fig tree fervently praying for the Messiah, as being the Messiah.

Now that you can appreciate what causes Nathanael to have such a quick change of heart, let’s focus in on what happens next, because Nathanael’s confession that Jesus is the Son of God is not the end of the story but rather the beginning. If Jesus were in the business of converting people to a particular doctrine (as so many “evangelicals” today seem to be doing), he could have counted this day a success and gone his merry way. “Okay, I’ve got this guy Philip to believe in me…didn’t take much…and his friend Nathanael now recognizes me as the Son of God, the Messiah…Guess I’m done here…Okay guys, be sure to tell everyone about me. Live long and prosper.”

There are a lot of people who see religion in this manner, thinking that what matters is that we correctly identify Jesus as the Son of God, and once we’ve done that, we’re good. For them, it’s all about evangelism, and evangelism is about bringing people over to believe this doctrine – Jesus is the Son of God who died for your sins – and when a person confesses this belief, our job is done. It’s like being a Democrat or Republican; you embrace an ideology and you persuade others to embrace that ideology. It’s like were looking for people to sign a petition (“Do you believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God? You do? Great. Sign here…”). Unfortunately such evangelism too often resembles sales; once you’ve bought the product, you realize that there is no customer service. You get put on hold, and the recording just says, “read your Bible and someone will be right with you.”

Jesus is not a salesmen. He’s not looking for people to “buy” who he is; it’s not simply about accepting some notion; ***it’s*** ***about following***. Jesus says to Nathanael, “You believe because I displayed some supernatural powers? I told you that I saw you under a fig tree? You aint seen nothing yet.” Jesus promises Nathanael, “you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man,” something along the lines of what Jacob witnessed at Bethel – Jacob’s ladder. Jesus says that you will see the distance between heaven and earth breeched, as Jesus himself is evidence of that breech – God with us – Emmanuel. I haven’t come to you, Nathanael, just so you could see me and know my title; I’m inviting you to stay with me forever. Follow me, Nathanael, and you will never be separated from God again.

I had a very clever friend when I served in the army. He had married a woman prior to enlisting because the benefits paid to a married soldier were greater than those given to a single soldier. He paid his “wife” some amount for her compliance, and he came away with a profit. He never saw his wife; they spoke on the phone once in a while.

Theirs was purely a marriage of convenience. There are some who look upon their Christian faith the same way my friend looked upon his marriage – it worked to the mutual benefit of me and God; I (presumably) have the assurance of salvation, and God can claim me as His own. It’s a convenient relationship, but in fact it’s not a relationship at all; it’s stagnant. It doesn’t go anywhere. God’s out there, and I don’t bother with Him…and hopefully he doesn’t bother with me.

Such an arrangement is not what God intends for us. He’s not content with our confession of faith in His existence or an affirmation about the identity of Jesus (“I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth…”). This is not a marriage of convenience; this is a relationship. And he’s not looking for club members; He’s looking for *disciples!* He wants us to see “heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

If you look around you, you will no doubt see people who are in relationship with Christ. How do you know? Well, the Church is the body of Christ, and these people have a long-term relationship with the Church. They attend three-hour council meetings. They solicit estimates on masonry work. They fix the toilets to their own detriment. They teach, they preach, they visit, they sing Christmas carols, they cook, they *serve*. Why? Because, just like Jesus, this Church doesn’t sit still. It’s constantly on the move and it beckons us to move with it, to take the leap of faith that it takes to go into the wilderness, because if you don’t go where the Holy Spirit leads you, you’re not following Jesus.

As a young man, I was a lot like Nathanael; I felt a need for a savior, so I read scripture and went to church and I prayed and I had one of those moments, where it became clear to me that Jesus was indeed my Savior; he saw me under the fig tree, so to speak, and he came to me. And I was so excited to know at that instant that he was the Son of God. But that is where I left the relationship. “Okay, Jesus. You’ve proved yourself to me. Thanks, and have a nice life.” And years passed, and our relationship went nowhere *until I began to follow him.* How did I follow him? The church I was attending asked me to help with this and that. I taught Sunday school, and I knew that I could only teach what I believed and what I knew…and I discovered just how little I knew about Jesus. Prayer and Bible study helped me to better know him, but serving him through caring for others near and far, ministering and encouraging and loving others, whether I was in church or not. In pushing my own limits of love, I came to recognize that only God’s Spirit could increase my own level of compassion. It wasn’t enough to imitate Jesus; I needed to follow Jesus, because only God can re-create us to be more loving, more joyful, more faithful. And as I’m re-created by God, my desire to serve, to minister, to fellowship and to worship God increases.

Nathanael confesses Jesus to be the Son of God, his King and his Savior. Jesus replies, “You believe, but you will see greater things. You will see “the heavens opened, and angels ascending and descending.” You will see the distance between yourself and God vanish, and you will know that God is with you *now!*

Insomuch as this church is led by Christ, those who come will meet Christ, in worship, in service, in fellowship, in mission. Your calling begins with that simple invitation, “come and see.” But it continues as Jesus invites you to follow him and be amazed as you find the heavens split open and a deepened relationship with the Living God.