

Doubting Nathanael

Sermon Text: John 1:43-51

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, Amen.

⁴³*The next day He [Jesus] decided to go to Galilee and find Philip. And Jesus said to him, "follow me."* ⁴⁴*Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.*

⁴⁵*Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "we have found the One written of by Moses in the Law and the Prophets, Jesus the son of Joseph from Nazareth."* ⁴⁶*And Nathanael said to him, "can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "come and see."*

⁴⁷*Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him and He said concerning him, "behold a true Israelite, in whom there is no deceit."* ⁴⁸*Nathanael said to him, "how do you know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig-tree, I saw you."* ⁴⁹*Nathanael answered Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God, You are the King of Israel."* ⁵⁰*Jesus answered and said to him, "You have believed because I said to you that I saw you underneath the fig-tree? You will see greater things than this."* ⁵¹*And He said to him, "Truly, truly I say to you, you will see Heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."*

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As Jesus travelled through Galilee He called disciples to follow Him. On this particular day He called Philip to come and follow Him. Philip instantly believed Jesus to be the promised Messiah, the One written of by Moses in the Law and the Prophets. Philip was so overjoyed to have found the Messiah that he raced off to find his companion Nathanael who was resting under a fig-tree.

Philip raced up to Nathanael, "We've found Him. We've found the One written of by Moses in the Law and the Prophets. We've found the Messiah."

Nathanael sat up, could this be true? Have we really found the Messiah?

Then Philip says, "He is Jesus the son of Joseph from Nazareth."

And with that Nathanael slumped back down against the tree, "can anything good come out of Nazareth?" he remarked. Nathanael was a true Israelite, he

knew the Scriptures, he knew that the Messiah was to come from Bethlehem, not Nazareth (cf. John 7:41-42). Besides nothing good could possibly come from Nazareth.

There was more to Nathanael's words than just the prophecy about the Messiah being from Bethlehem, there was prejudice in his comment. There is an important difference between Nathanael and Philip that can often be overlooked. In Acts 6:1 we learn that there were Hebraic Jews and Hellenistic Jews. The Hebraic Jews were those Jews that spoke Hebrew (or Aramaic) and held to the traditional Hebraic Judaic customs. The Hellenistic Jews were not Gentiles who converted to Judaism nor were they half-breeds like the Samaritans, they were pure-bred Jews; the difference was that they spoke mainly Greek and had been heavily influenced by the Greek Hellenistic culture.

When we look at the disciples Jesus had already called, Philip, Andrew and Simon Peter, we notice that all three had Greek names. Philip is Greek for "lover of horses", Andrew comes from the Greek word '*andros*' meaning "man" (as in male adult), and Simon was the Greek version of the Hebrew Simeon (cf. Luke 2:25). All three of these disciples were Hellenistic Jews. As for Nathanael, his name was a Hebraic name. Nathanael is Hebrew for "God has given." Nathanael was a true Israelite. He was a traditional Hebraic Jew. And thus Nazareth was below his consideration.

Nazareth was a very lowly town, and I don't just mean low as in lower economic class, but Nazareth was a town of low-lives. Nazareth was full of corrupt tax-collectors, prostitutes and the like. Nazareth was the capital of immoral behaviour in Galilee. "There was no way that the Messiah would come from Nazareth," or so Nathanael thought, "nothing good could ever come out of Nazareth." So Nathanael disregarded what Philip had said.

Philip knew that he could not argue with Nathanael, his words were merely human words, and Nathanael knew that God's Word had said the Messiah would come from Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2). So Philip did the only thing possible. "Come and see," he said to Nathanael, "come and see for yourself, then you will not doubt."

So Nathanael went with Philip to see Jesus, and as Nathanael approached, Jesus said, "behold a true Israelite, in whom there is no deceit." As mentioned

above Nathanael was a Hebraic Jew, a true Israelite, but that is not what Jesus meant by this statement. Jesus wasn't concerned about lineage or culture, He was concerned about faith. For Jesus, a true Israelite was not a Hebraic Jew or a Hellenistic Jew. For Jesus a true Israelite was one who believed in the Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah. As St. Paul says "not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel." (Rom. 9:6) But blessed is the man in who there is no deceit (Ps. 32:2). Nathanael is a true Israelite, in him is no deceit. He doubted Philip's words because he was without deceit. He knew that the Messiah was born in Bethlehem, and thus he would not expect Philip's words about the Messiah coming from Nazareth.

Nathanael was an honest Israelite, and he would not accept that the Messiah came from Nazareth unless he was convinced by God's Word alone. And so Philip brought him to Jesus, the Word of God made flesh. And here Nathanael could hear the truth for himself.

Jesus begins by showing Nathanael his omniscience (all-knowing). Jesus knew who Nathanael was and what he was thinking.

"How do you know me?" asked Nathanael. And so Jesus tells him, "before Philip called you, when you were under the fig-tree, I saw you."

This was not just a simple seeing, as if Jesus had been walking past the fig-tree. No, this was supernatural seeing. Jesus was nowhere near Nathanael and yet He could see him. In saying this Jesus showed to Nathanael that He was omnipresent (present everywhere).

At these Words of Jesus, Nathanael stopped doubting and believed. "You are the Son of God," he exclaimed, "You are the King of Israel." Nathanael now believed what Philip had told him, that this is the One written about by Moses in the Law and in the Prophets. Jesus had shown Nathanael that he was omniscient and omnipresent, this meant that Jesus had to be God Himself made flesh. Nathanael believed and called Him the Son of God. This statement is profound. For later on Jesus calls Himself the Son of Man, demonstrating His humanity and confessing the Messiah to be truly human. But here Nathanael confesses the divinity of Jesus and confesses that the Messiah is also truly God. And it is this fact, that the Messiah is the Son of God, that convinced Nathanael to believe. Nathanael was a true Israelite, in whom there was no deceit. He knew the Word of God, he knew the Old Testament

promises of the Messiah, and he knew that the Messiah would be the Son of God. This is profound because it shows us that even the Old Testament confesses the divinity of the Messiah, and that Jews who were awaiting the Messiah were able to know this.

Then, in response to Nathanael's confession, Jesus says something even more profound, "You have believed because I said to you that I saw you underneath the fig-tree? You will see greater things than this." Jesus states that Nathanael will see even greater signs that Jesus is the Messiah. But as for now, Nathanael believed because he heard Jesus say "I saw you underneath the fig-tree." Nathanael didn't need any great miracle to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, he simply needed to hear the Words of Jesus and that was enough.

In the story of doubting Thomas at the end of John's Gospel, Thomas wouldn't believe until he touched Jesus. After He had touched Jesus and confessed Jesus to be his Lord and his God, Jesus said, "Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Blessed are those who, like Nathanael, do not need great wonders and miracles to believe in God. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet still believe. Blessed are those who have heard the Word of God and have believed.

We don't need to see miracles or healings or speaking in tongues to believe in Christ. Paul says faith comes by hearing and hearing through the Word of Christ (Rom. 10:17). God's Word is all we need.

There are many people out there that doubt the truth, that don't believe Jesus Christ is their Lord and Saviour. But we don't need to try and convince them through fancy arguments or tricks or contemporary worship or pentecostal displays of miracles. We don't need to do any of that. Instead, like Philip we just need to take them to the true source of life. We just have to point them to the Word of God, for God's Word is truth (John 17:17). Our words are only the words of man, in them is no power. But if we point them to the Scripture then we bring to them God's Word, and God's Word is powerful (Isa. 55:11, Rom. 10:17, 1 Thess. 2:13, 2 Tim. 3:15 Heb. 4:12).

It is not our job to try and force or convince people into the faith. It is the Spirit alone who creates faith (1 Cor. 12:9), through the Word of God. It is

merely our job to bring the Word to people. Article 5 of the *Augsburg Confession* says that the Holy Spirit produces faith, where and when He wills, in those who hear the Gospel. The job of Christians is not to try and argue people into the faith via man's words, instead we are to point them to God's Word and allow God to instil faith in the believer.

As for you who have believed these Words of Christ, who confess Jesus as your Lord and your God, who confess Jesus as the Son of God and King of Israel, you will see even greater things than what the Word has told you. To the one who believes because he has heard the Word of Christ, you will see greater things than this.

Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

This promise of Jesus brings to mind the vision of Jacob, who was called Israel. In Genesis 28:12 Jacob looked up and saw a ladder reaching from earth and up into heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. This is what Jacob saw but you will see something even greater. You will stand in the place of Jacob as the true Israelites, in whom there is no deceit. But instead of seeing a ladder connecting earth to heaven you will see Jesus the Son of Man connecting earth to heaven.

In Jacob's day, before the Messiah had come, man was bound under the Law of God. The only way man could be saved was through perfect obedience to the Law. Man had to climb the ladder of the Law to make it to heaven. But for those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Saviour, they will see something greater than a ladder. They will see Jesus bridging heaven and earth. Jesus Christ came and dwelt in the flesh. He died on the cross for the sake of your sins. No longer are we trapped under the Law of God. For Christ has set us free from the demands of the Law. He is the bridge between earth and heaven. No longer do we need to worry about keeping God's Law perfectly. Instead, we can look to Jesus, the One who was promised in the Law and the Prophets. Through faith alone in Christ alone are the heavens opened to you.

Don't just take my word for it. Instead come and see what the Word says, for this promise is given to you. Amen.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship

of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

O God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we praise You for wanting all people to worship You in spirit and in truth, and for making that possible by the light of Your Word. We, Your people, who have gathered to worship and praise You, now offer You our thanksgiving, praise, and prayer.

We thank You, Father, for sending Your Son Jesus Christ, and for making known through Him Your loving purpose that all who believe in Him may have everlasting life. We give You thanks for our redemption through His cross, for the forgiveness of our sins, for deliverance from all evil, and for the sure hope of eternal glory. We praise You for the gift of Your infallible Word, through which Your Spirit has given us saving faith. Send forth Your Word with power so that many may come from east and west and rejoice in Your saving mercy. May Your kingdom be filled with believers from every nation and tribe though they are sinners like ourselves, so that heaven and earth together may ring with praise for Your great salvation in Christ.

Renew our minds. Cleanse us from every sin. Lead us along the path to eternal life. Grant that we may trust Your love and power. As we live out our short spans of life, make us spiritually wise, so that in humility, forgiveness, and love, even to those who hate us, we may reflect Your grace. Help us so that we may not be conquered by evil, but may rather conquer all evil with good. Grant that we may use well the charismatic gifts that You have provided for the good of all. Heal us of every disease. Uphold those who face the test of sickness or other suffering. Guard our loved ones wherever they may be. Shield us from the powers of wickedness. Give us each day our daily bread, and make us contented in every circumstance.

Watch over Your Church. Give it pastors who are true shepherds and faithful teachers of Your people, pastors who are not swayed by public opinion or who seek to be glorified by only giving people what they want to hear. Rather, give them continued strength to stand on Your Word alone, to preach both Law and Gospel in its entirety.

Give wisdom and understanding to those who are entrusted with the responsibilities of governing our country. Grant them a concern for Your will,

and the desire to rule in such a way that all people may live in quietness and peace. Forgive our leaders for the tragic decisions they have made in the past, decisions that lead a country to ruin. Let them see that the way to make a nation great is to trust and follow Your directions.

These things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Redeemer who loved the Church, and gave Himself up for it. Amen.

THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

¹ The Word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time. He said: ² “Leave at once for the large city of Nineveh! Announce to it the Message that I tell you!”

³ So Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, as the LORD had told him. Nineveh was a large city before God. It took three days to walk through it. ⁴ Jonah began to enter the city and walked for one day. He proclaimed: “There are still forty days until Nineveh will be overthrown!”

⁵ The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them... ¹⁰ When God saw what they had done, that they had turned away from their wicked conduct, God relented from the calamity that He had threatened to send on them, and He did not do it.

1 Corinthians 7:29-35

²⁹ This is what I am saying, my fellow-Christians: the time has been shortened. From now on even those who have wives should be as if they had none! ³⁰ Those who weep should be as though they were not weeping! Those who rejoice should be as though they were not rejoicing! Those who buy should be as though they did not possess! ³¹ Those who use the world should be as though they were not using it! For the form of this world is passing away. ³² However, I want you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the affairs of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. ³³ However, he who has married is concerned about the affairs of the world, how he may please his wife, ³⁴ and his interests have been divided. The unmarried

woman or the virgin is concerned about the affairs of the Lord, so that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. However, the woman who has married is concerned about the affairs of the world, how she may please her husband. ³⁵ I am saying this for your own good, not to throw a noose on you, but with a view to good order, and that you may be devoted to the Lord without being distracted.

Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴ After John had been arrested, Jesus went to Galilee and preached the Good News of God: ¹⁵ “The time has come and the kingdom of God is near. Repent, and believe in the Good News!”

¹⁶ While He was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Simon’s brother Andrew casting a net in the sea. For they were fishermen. ¹⁷ Jesus told them, “Come and follow Me! I shall make you fishers of men.”

¹⁸ They at once left their nets and followed Him.

¹⁹ When He had gone on a little farther, He saw James, the son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were also in their boat, mending their nets. ²⁰ He called them at once; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed Him.