

Ascending and Descending

John 1:43-51

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What was Nathanael doing under the fig tree? We don't really know. Some commentators point out that under the fig tree was a common place where Rabbis met with students. One ancient writer noted that God used fig leaves to cover Adam and Eve in the garden when they were embarrassed by their nakedness.

When Jesus 'saw' Nathanael sitting under the fig tree did he see Nathanael a student of the Torah or Nathanael fallen child of Adam? Was Nathanael thinking of his soul or current events? Perhaps he, like so many, had traveled to hear the newest prophet – John the Baptist.

The crowds thronged to hear him. People traveled from Jerusalem. You could see the whole world there: determined seekers; desperate searchers for truth or help; frivolous folks who always followed the newest trends; concerned priest, worried about the rising influence of an outsider; probably some Roman militia to keep a eye on the mood of the crowds; people watchers and everything in between!

So not surprising at all for Nathanael to have gone to hear what John the Baptist had to say whether he went as a student of Torah or as someone who in their brokenness was looking for wholeness. But, now he sits under the fig tree. It is a place to think, reflect and ponder. The whole world – it seemed had been to hear John the Baptizer. If he was a thoughtful, dedicated student of Torah, he would have agreed with much that John had to say. He himself would have seen the many places where his fellow countrymen (and himself) had fallen short and not kept the commandments of the law. The sight of Roman soldiers would have been a sore spot. Roman presence meant a kind of peace but at a steep price. And many, many people still told stories about how dedicated believers had triumphed over the Greek oppressors – perhaps if they just believed more or kept the commandments more carefully a leader – a Messiah – could come to liberate them. Nathanael, like a lot of his contemporaries, longed for liberation but he was also cynical enough to realize that many others of his people profited from the Roman occupation and would not want to sour a good deal. Thinking of all those willing to look to other way to protect their comfy lifestyle, perhaps Nathanael wished they could go back to a time when God's people where more holy. But, then as a student of scripture, he would just have to shake his head – the very first one to be called Israel was also a schemer and, also, a deceiver. Maybe he put his head and his hands and thought the situation was hopeless.

And then Philip comes talking about another phenomenon: Jesus of Nazareth. Nathanael had missed the drama, but he had heard how another new prophet had gone to hear John the Baptist. He heard how this new prophet had asked John to baptize him but John and balked and said that he could not because he was not worthy. But this one, this Jesus, had insisted and

John had called him the Lamb of God. Nathanael thought it was a strange story but, as a student of scripture, not very interested because no Messiah was to come from Nazareth. So that's what he tells Philip: "What good can come out of Nazareth?" Philip doesn't argue, he just says, "Come and see."

And this Jesus looks at him and sees him. Sees into his hopes and fears, his dreams for a redeemed Israel, his failures, his longings, his insecurities, his deep concerns, his everything and says "Here is a true son of Israel in whom there is no deceit."

How could Jesus know him? Know his passion for his people and his despair for their short comings? How could Jesus know he had just been thinking of Jacob and deceit and he says, "Where did you get to know me?"

And Jesus says just a simple thing: "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."

Nathanael is convinced. Nathanael speaks words of faith: You are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel.

Jesus responds with yet another Jacob reference--this time to Jacob's ladder. He says, "The angels will go up and down on the son of man." That is, upon himself.

He's talking now about Jacob's experience at Bethel in Genesis 28 where heaven approached so close to earth that the inhabitants of the two realms could meet. Now in Jesus--not just in one geographical place--in Jesus, the realm of God would come that near.

No wonder Nathanael is captured by this Rabbi from Nazareth. Heaven touching earth is the deepest longing of the Jewish soul, perhaps it is the longing of every human heart.

Heaven is where love reigns. Where there is room for all God's children at the table. Where, in the words of a friend of mine, nothing's broken and no one's missing.

Not at all what earth is like. We know what earth is like. A glance through the morning paper shows us a world that couldn't be more different than God's realm of love . . . war, global warming, political gridlock, children, right here in this fertile valley there are children, people living with food insecurity – not knowing where their next meal is coming from.

But when Nathanael meets Jesus he sees what he never expected to see: Heaven gets a foothold on this earth. The first chapter of John says that 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.' Theologian, pastor, and political activist Jim Wallis says, "In Jesus, God hits the street." Nathanael life changes with the unlooked for call in ways he could never have imagined. In ways of incredible blessing but also great challenge. It was true then and it is true now.

This is a great text for this weekend as we celebrate the life of a Christian who found his call to be one of incredible blessing and great, great challenge.

Local pastors had gathered in 1955 to discuss the issue of forced segregation on city buses. Rosa Parks had recently been arrested for refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white person. Her trial was on the horizon.

A lot of ideas go back and forth, but nothing clear emerges. Then the young pastor of the church, new to town, unknown to the others – a guy in his 20's--raises his hand and the boycott had its leader.

Young Rev. King, will dare to believe and proclaim that the reign of God come near. His life will tirelessly embody the belief that in Jesus, God has hit the streets.

Many years later, now very well known, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would describe his glimpse of what it looks like when the reign of God comes near. He said:

" . . . one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low . . . and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

" . . . one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. . . my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

With Martin Luther King's words, through his actions, according to his dream, we could see it, too. Because he had raised his hand, had stepped up to walk in that place where heaven and earth come near. Because he stepped up to walk with Jesus, it turned out that "one day" was unexpectedly closer than we thought.

It's hard to follow Jesus to those unexpected places sometimes. Too often the Reign of God enters our world with a cost. Dr. King knew this, too.

From the unlikely location of the Birmingham jail, he wrote about a letter he had just received from a white brother, a fellow pastor, urging caution, who said: "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but. . . The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth."

Dr. King responded: "Such an attitude stems . . . from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually . . ." he said, "Human progress . . . comes through the tireless efforts of (persons) willing to be co-workers with God . . ."

" . . . Early Christians entered a town . . . in the conviction that they were 'a colony of heaven,' called to obey God . . . Small in number, they were big in commitment . . . By their effort and example they brought an end to . . . ancient evils . . . "

" . . . The time is always ripe to do right."

Martin Luther King, who we celebrate this weekend, helped a whole generation see where the ways of heaven begin to get an unlikely foothold on this earth. He helped us remember that walking with Jesus means working for justice--revealing in our midst already a world where love reigns, a realm of God's shalom--of wholeness--where nothing's broken and no one's missing, where a table is spread and all are welcome.

Karl Barth is supposed to have said, "When you preach, you've got to have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other." He was right. The call of Nathanael reminds us. When we walk with Jesus, we walk in those unlikely places where heaven and earth come near. In this fragmented world, we represent God's reign gaining a foothold here already, and our actions need to show it.

Next week we have elect church leaders who have said yes to a call. No doubt there will be blessing and there will be challenge. Their service and their passion are needed to guide us and the church into the next year. They deserve our prayers and with encouragement.

But, it is important for all the rest of us to remember this: you may not have been called to serve as a church officer – but you are most certainly called. One of my professors at seminary used to say that we call elders and deacons to do necessary chores so that the rest of us have more time to give to the kingdom! Their ordination and service frees you – us – to work.

The risen Christ sees you. Knows you: knows your hopes and dreams; knows your promise and passion; knows your failures and despair. The Risen Christ loves you and beckons you to follow him into this new year. How will Christ call you to live out heaven in our streets and in our church?

May our lives proclaim the reign of God comes near. May our church be a place where we catch a glimpse of a time and place where nothing's broken and no one's missing, and a table is spread for all God's children.