

Matt Henry  
John 1:43-51  
14 Jan 2017

“Nathanael, Nazareth and Newton” John 1

God’s grace and peace...

The text for today is John 1, the account of Jesus calling Philip who in turn invites Nathanael. I just happened to have a Pastor’s circuit conference this week and my responsibility was to share a study on this very text. Good conversation; went well enough, none of the pastors swore at each other. But there was some dissension. I was making a point about Philip’s style of evangelism—personal, relational and invitational. I just love those three words: “Come and see.” I said to the pastors, “This is more of a fun way to go about the Gospel. Philip didn’t explain, he invited. I think when we as pastors just give people the answers, we’re actually depriving them of the joy of discovery. We’re robbing them spiritually. The process of discovery is meant for them to have and we shouldn’t take it from them by just telling people the answers.” And as you might imagine, some pastors kinda pushed back against that. Because I think they like giving people the answers. After all, that’s what a pastor should do, right? Be the guy with all the answers. It validates us as professionals and all our theological training. Having all the answers, even if that were possible, would be cumbersome for me and boring for you. I honestly believe that’s why some

people are so bored by church where the thinking and discovery is done for them. That is so boring and dull. That's not what life in Christ was ever meant to be.

Our job is not to have the answers, but to invite people to Jesus as we ourselves follow Him. Reason and observation are always appropriate, but curiosity is also a great dynamic which we should encourage and honor, not squash. People are meant to embark on a journey of discovery. And if we keep giving the answer pre-emptively, eventually it dumbs people down because they learn they don't have to think for themselves.

I can still remember my sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Nickerson. I remember going up to her and asking her what a word meant and do you know what she did? She pointed me to the dictionary. The nerve! But it was something I could do for myself. I looked the word up. It became a teachable moment. Good teachers and parents don't tell their kids the answers to everything. They help their kids think it through as best as they can themselves because that's how kids learn and grow. So too do disciple makers guide others as they need, but we shouldn't answer for them when they can come to that point of realization with just a little effort.

If we are confident in that Jesus is the one with all the answers—and He is—then that means we can invite people to Him.

“Come and see” has complete faith in person of Jesus.

“Come and see” is actually, can be a respectful of the seeker.

“Come and see” really means “come with me on this journey and let’s see this together.”

“Come and see” says staying here won’t give you the answers to your questions. This is an invitation for you to see if this Jesus is the real deal.

So when it comes to discipleship, I want to take some of the pressure off. We can never have all the answers and even if we did, we don’t have to prove anything. That’s not our job! We should be friendly, winsome, articulate, informed. We should be all those things. But our job is not to sell anyone on anything. We are called to be followers and imitators of Jesus, not salesmen for Jesus. He very much wants us to become like Him and help others become like Him.

Please do not hear what I am not saying. I’m not saying withhold truth or withhold the answers from someone who is genuinely seeking. Not at all. But I am saying, it’s more spiritual, more powerful when the person who is seeking experiences the answer directly and personally. That’s meant for them. Learning happens in the journey, along the way. It means for our discipleship God not only teaches through the Word, but also through life and circumstances. We all know

the experience of being involved and drawn and into something is more powerful and indelible than just being told about it. Nathanael would agree that's how it happened for him.

There he is under the fig tree in Galilee when Philip says, "We've found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (v.45). Nathanael said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Now, that's not as snarky as it sounds. It's an honest question. Nazareth wasn't on anyone's radar. There's no mention of Nazareth in the Old Testament—no idea or expectation the Messiah would come from there. Philip doesn't attempt to explain, defend or convince. He just says to Nathanael, "Come and see." They go. Jesus sees Nathanael coming toward him and says, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" (v. 47). Now how do we take that? Some people think Jesus is being sarcastic. Some people say this is Jesus responding to the "dig" on Nazareth. I don't think it's either of those. Or maybe it's Jesus way of saying, "This Nathanael, he says what's on his mind. You always know where you and with this guy." Or is it that Jesus knows what faithful confession Nathanael is about to make?

Nathanael literally asks, "From where do you know me?" Jesus answers with the same precision and more—giving not only the where but also the when.

“Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” That’s enough proof for Nathanael and he makes this great confession: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (v. 49)

Now if Philip had told Nathanael as much under the fig tree, it would have been just as true. But it would not have meant as much to Nathanael then as it does now. He had to experience it for himself. After spending some time under a tree, he’s at a point of genuine contemplation.

That place of epiphany under a tree made me think of Isaac Newton. Remember the legendary story of the apple falling while he was under the tree? The apple caused Newton to consider what force was at work and that led to the discovery of the law of gravity in 1687. Newton told the story to his biographers before his death and this same apple tree has been documented and certified. It’s located in his childhood home in Woolsthorpe Manor in England. And even though this happened more than 400 years ago, Newton’s apple tree is still alive and well. It’s amazing! Under that tree is the place where observation, curiosity and contemplation led to a great discovery.

What’s interesting as people go back to Woolsthorpe Manor, they are still finding new discoveries about Newton even today. They are using special light and detecting carvings and sketches in coal on the walls of his home. There are

pictures that he drew that no one knew were there before. Now they are looking and finding new things that were once hidden through the passage of time.

Whether it's walls that still talk and reveal genius, or a tree that is still alive and bearing fruit, this is how the Word works too. There are so many discoveries to be made. And I think I have one for you today about the tree—not the apple tree, but the fig tree that Nathanael was under. This is a special detail, like Newton's sketches on the walls, you have to look deep, but it's there.

In Jesus' day, Rabbis were the ones who had all the answers, right? They were the authority on spiritual matters. Well, it was Jewish tradition and custom for Rabbis to study the Torah while underneath a fig tree. Torah is the first five books of the Bible. So is that what Nathanael was doing under the fig tree? He's at least thinking about the Torah after Philip finds him and says, "Hey, Nathanael, we found the one that is written about by Moses in the Torah...and the Prophets." God would go for that kind of irony—right place, right time; and yet the whole thing is turned upside down.

This just may be right. Look at the context for clues. After all, Nathanael calls Jesus "Rabbi". Look at the corresponding words. Jesus had called Nathanael "a true Israelite." Nathanael now calls Jesus "the king of Israel." And even further, Jesus quotes the Torah to Nathanael when he says, "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 is a reference to Jacob’s dream, Jacob’s ladder in Genesis 28. That’s in the Torah. And it’s like Jesus is using that fig tree location to turn it all around so Jesus is the Rabbi and Nathanael is his disciple. “Before Philip called you when you were under the fig tree, I saw you....You didn’t see me, I saw you.. You didn’t choose me, I chose you.” That tradition of the fig tree, Torah and rabbis has got to be in play here. I’m sure Nathanael’s fig tree, unlike Newton’s apple tree, is not there anymore. But the Jesus who saw Him under that tree is! He has called us and commanded us to make disciples.

There is something to model here in our discipleship. If you want to disciple someone, be like Philip in your approach—inviting, personal, real. If you want to be disciplined, be like Nathanael in your response—forthright, curious and all in.

Jesus told Nathanael he’d see greater things. And the promise of seeing greater things isn’t true just for Nathanael, it’s true for Nathanael and Philip. This is one of my final points but it’s an important one because it applies the story to us. Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” The “you” Jesus says in v. 51 is plural. The “come and see” has turned into “you will see”. You

plural—Philip and Nathanael. And in some regard, we are included in that you plural. Because we will see heaven opened. We will see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man when He returns.

Our life as believers isn't about knowing the answers, but knowing Him who is the Answer. He tells us there is something greater in store. This is where get to go as a church. The call of discipleship is to "Come and see."

In Jesus' name, Amen.

The nature of the Gospel is an invitation to experience firsthand what life in Christ is all about: "Come and see." Reason and observation are always appropriate, but curiosity is also a great

dynamic for the disciple of Jesus. He always surprises us and challenges our preconceived notions.

### **Philip or Regular?**

No one likes a know-it-all!

Philip's approach to evangelism is good because it's personal, \_\_\_\_\_ and invitational.

Always giving the answers is boring and \_\_\_\_\_ people of important learning and spiritual discovery about Christ.

People need an \_\_\_\_\_ and a \_\_\_\_\_!

"Come and See" is an invitation to journey together.

We are called to be \_\_\_\_\_ of Jesus, not be salesmen for Jesus.

### **Trees and Truth**

T / F It's a surprise the Messiah would come from Nazareth because there is no mention of Nazareth in the Old Testament.

Nathanael literally asks, "From where do you know me?" Jesus answers with the same precision and more—giving not only the \_\_\_\_\_, but also the \_\_\_\_\_.

Rabbis would traditionally study the \_\_\_\_\_ under a fig tree.

Read Genesis 28:10-22, Jacob's Ladder. The land, the promise, the seed, the presence of God and access to heaven—all are fulfilled in Christ!

### **Greater Things**

Be like \_\_\_\_\_ in our witness.

Be like \_\_\_\_\_ in our response.

"You shall see greater things than these..." (v. 50). What will we see?