

Nathanael Who?
A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
Augustana Lutheran Church
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In the Today's English Version (TEV) of the Bible, section headings are inserted into the text. The portion of John, chapter 1, read for our Gospel this morning bears the heading, "Jesus calls Philip and Nathanael." It appears, then, that these two were called to be disciples, among the original 12.

In the communion rail just below me, we find the names of the twelve disciples, yet we will not see the name of Nathanael. The only Gospel to use that name is the Gospel of John and only in the 1st chapter and last chapter. He plays no role in the ministry of Jesus. In the communion rail, we find the name Bartholomew, and some scholars assume that the two names refer to the same person. It could be he is Nathanael Bar (which means son of) Tholomew. Bartholomew is listed as one of the 12, but that's all the biblical information we have of him. We know very little whichever name is used.

We're not talking about a person who made a significant impact during the earthly ministry of Our Lord, nor is there much evidence that he did during the remainder of his life. What can we know about this man named Nathanael and maybe the same person as the other Gospels call Bartholomew?

He lived in Galilee, the northernmost region of Palestine. John, chapter 21, further identifies his origin as Cana in Galilee. That might inform Nathanael's question after Philip invited Nathanael to come and see "Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth" (John 1:45). What did Nathanael say? "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46). Seems he must have thought Cana a better place to be from than Nazareth.

As Jesus approached Nathanael, he commended Nathanael saying he was a person without deceit. The TEV reads, "There is nothing false about him" (John 1:47). That's a wonderful characterization of a person. I'd like that said about me, wouldn't you? To be seen as having such integrity and with such a disposition would certainly be complimentary. Nothing false about him. Earlier translations used the word "guile." Nathanael is described as having no guile in him. Today that sounds like something which could be surgically removed as if guile ducts got stopped up by stones and need to be taken out. Guile rings in the ear as a medical condition instead of a quality of character. Anyway, "nothing false" helps us understand the character of Nathanael.

We have another strong clue as to Nathanael's character in the statement by Jesus to Nathanael when he said, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you" (John 1:48). Why fig tree? Houses of the peasants in Palestine were very small, maybe only one room, two would be a luxury. They enclosed very little space, and the room inside was functional, not for ease. Fig trees have very large leaves, and when they come out

the multitude of leaves act as an umbrella giving shade. One could find a place to sit under the fig tree for contemplation of the Word of the Lord, a place of prayer and meditation. To be found under the fig tree could well be a statement of Nathanael's pious faith and deep devotion to the Lord God Almighty. Perceiving this quality in Nathanael, Jesus invites him to follow and become a disciple.

In response to this dialogue with Jesus, Nathanael declares Jesus as the Son of God, the King of Israel (John 1:49). The conclusion of the reading for the day has this curious forecast by Jesus that Nathanael "will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (John 1:51).

Does that ring a bell with you? Let me help. Remember the story of Jacob who stole the birthright and blessing that rightfully belonged to his brother Esau and with his mother's help finagled these privileges from his father Isaac? When his brother, Esau, found out, he wanted to kill Jacob, but Jacob vacated the premises and went to Haran. On the way, he rested for the night, had a dream, "And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Genesis 28:12). What Jacob, who was later to be renamed Israel, experienced, Jesus said Nathanael would experience: angels ascending and descending.

Out of Jacob's experience, comes a song that most of us know and many have sung.

We are climbing Jacob's ladder....

Soldiers of the cross

Why, if Jacob did not climb the ladder, and Nathanael was not told that he would climb the ladder, are we trying to climb the ladder? "We are climbing..." What a perversion of the Biblical record and witness. It is not we who climb ladders to the Lord but the Lord who comes to us.

God is coming down to greet us....

Thank you Lord of Hosts.

Not every rung goes higher, higher

But

Every step he comes closer...

Till we know God's care.

As Jacob was called to a new role in God's plan for Israel and as Nathanael was called to a new vocation by Jesus, so we have been called to live as part of God's new creation, redeemed by Christ and commissioned by him to be the Church, his instrument on earth.

Samuel, the focus of the first lesson this morning, has quite a biography. His mother, Hannah, and his father, Elkanah, had no children, and 1 Samuel 1:10 reads, "She was deeply distressed, and she cried bitterly as she prayed to the Lord" (TEV). She went to the Temple in Jerusalem to offer prayer. The priest, Eli, observing this long, intense prayer, interrupted Hannah, even accusing her of being drunk. After conversation, Eli

said to her, “Go in peace and may the God of Israel give you what you have asked for” (1 Samuel 17). Elkanah and Hannah did have a baby, their first and only child, named Samuel. Hannah told her husband, “As soon as the child is weaned, I will take him to the house of the Lord, where he will stay all his life” (1 Samuel 1:22). She did and said to Eli, the priest, “As long as he lives, he will belong to the Lord” (1 Samuel 1:28).

It was to the boy Samuel that God called in a dream which, at first, Samuel did not discern as coming from the Lord. Through Eli’s help, Samuel finally understood that the Lord God was calling him, and Samuel acknowledged the voice and presence of God who then spoke to him a sobering message about Eli and his house.

The next day, Eli called Samuel, and Samuel responded, “Here I am.” Samuel had to deliver some dire news to Eli, the priest who responded by saying, “It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him” (1 Samuel 3:18). Must have been a difficult bit of news for Eli to hear about his rebellious sons.

The boy Samuel received the message from the Lord and delivered it to Eli,. Nathanael faithfully received the call of Christ Jesus, and was with him throughout his earthly ministry and beyond.

You and I have like Samuel and Nathanael been called by Christ not to climb ladders to heaven, but do be his witnesses on earth, to patiently and persistently share the compassion of Christ with others.

It was a busy morning in the doctor’s office, about 8:30, when an elderly gentleman in his 80’s arrived to have stitches removed from his thumb. He said he was in a hurry, as he had an appointment at 9:00 a.m. Being the nurse, I took his vital signs and had him take a seat, knowing it could be an hour before someone would see him. I saw him looking at his watch, and decided since I had a moment I would evaluate his wound. It was well healed, so I talked to one of the doctors, got the needed supplies, removed his sutures, and redressed his wound.

While take care of him, I asked him if he had another doctor’s appointment this morning and if that’s why he was in such a hurry. He told me, “No,” but explained that he needed to get to the nursing home to eat breakfast with his wife. I inquired as to her health, and he told me that she had been there for a while and that she was a victim of Alzheimer’s Disease.

As we talked, I asked if she would be upset if he was a bit late. He replied that she no longer knew who he was, that she had not recognized him in five years now. I was surprised, and asked him “And you still go every morning event though she doesn’t know who you are?” He smiled as he patted my hand and said, “She doesn’t know me, but I still know who she is.”

Even though we do not always respond to God's call and the nudges of the Holy Spirit and that days go by without our being conscious of our role as servants of Christ, the Lord still comes to us. We may be unconscious of God's presence, but the Lord still calls and still invites us to "Come and see, be my disciples, follow me, walk in the Light." With Samuel, Mary, Nathanael, and a host of the committed through the centuries, we haltingly, humbly, yet faithfully say, "Here I am, send me and use me." Amen.