

GREATER THINGS

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John 1:43-51

Why are we here in church? Why do we take the name Christian? Why do we identify ourselves as followers of Jesus Christ? There are many answers to those questions—many reasons why we gather here each week. But one thing we would agree on is that we are Christians because we believe in something “out there,” something beyond the world we normally see and experience, something greater than ourselves, something holy, something divine.

Think about the story of Jacob's ladder. Jacob was the grandson of Abraham. It was with Abraham that God made that first covenant—the covenant in which God promised to be with us. Abraham's son was Isaac, and Isaac had two sons—Esau and Jacob. As you will recall, Jacob—the younger of the two—was something of a schemer. He successfully hoodwinked his father Isaac into transferring the family inheritance to him instead of the eldest son, Esau, as he should have done.

Having essentially stolen his brother's inheritance, Jacob flees to another country. He runs until he is exhausted. Then he lays down to sleep using a rock for a pillow. And he has a dream. He dreams of a stairway—a ladder—linking earth to heaven. And on this stairway there are angels traveling up and down. Angels are God's messengers and one can only presume that they are moving between heaven and earth performing the will of God, conducting God's business. They are the celestial civil servants.

In Jacob's dream, the curtain of the cosmos is pulled back and Jacob is blessed to view the reality of God's kingdom. He can see beyond the mundane of this existence; he can witness the divine. After experiencing this vision, Jacob declares, *Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!* (Genesis 28:16).

Jacob would go on from that place. God would change Jacob's name to Israel and he would father twelve sons—representing the twelve tribes of Israel. But that day, in that place, alone and on the run, Jacob catches a glimpse of the reality of God's kingdom.

Think of this as if you are visiting Disney World and you possess x-ray glasses with the ability to see through the walls and the scenery. You would see the reality of the magic kingdom that is hidden from normal eyes. You would see the tunnels under the park, you would see the pneumatic tubes that secretly remove the trash and garbage, you would see the hidden kitchens where all the food is prepared. You would see the magic.

God's kingdom, of course, is not magic, but it is our belief in the presence of a divine reality that draws us to be Christians. We believe in something "out there." We believe in the presence of the Lord.

Our reading for today comes from the first chapter of the gospel of John. This gospel opens with that wonderful prologue that reads, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* The gospel goes on to introduce John the Baptist—the one who heralds the coming of the Christ. Next, Jesus arrives and begins calling his followers. First, he calls the brothers Peter and Andrew. And then, as we read today, he calls Philip. We read that Jesus finds Philip and invites him to *Follow me*, and Philip obeys.

Philip then locates his friend Nathanael and informs him, *We have found him about whom Moses [and] the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.* What follows then is a rather confusing series of give-and-takes between Philip and Nathanael and Nathanael and Jesus. And honestly, it is hard to put your finger on what is happening here. What I've figured out is that it helps if you look at Nathanael as being just an ordinary person. He is the every-man of the story. In fact, I believe Nathanael's purpose is to represent us—the readers. It is as if the writer is asking, "What was it like to meet Jesus for the first time? I want you to look through Nathanael's eyes."

Nathanael is clearly a person of belief. He is a student of the scriptures. He is actively seeking the one prophesized by Moses and the prophets. So, when Jesus calls Philip, Philip knows he must alert his friend Nathanael. Nathanael harbors a healthy skepticism. He may be searching for the one proclaimed in scripture, but he's not going to latch on to the first smooth-talker who comes along claiming to be the Messiah. In fact, we know that many others at that time had already made this claim. When Philip identifies Jesus as being from Nazareth, Nathanael is dubious and utters those words that would become associated with him forever, *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" We're not sure why he says this. The best guess is that Nathanael, who was from the town of Cana—a town not far from Nazareth—was reflecting a home-town pride. It is possible the two towns had an ongoing rivalry. Imagine that a friend says to you, "Hey, I know a guy who is a whiz at the stock market. He can double your investments. He's from Watertown." And you might respond, "Can anything good come out of Watertown?" (Of course, it can.) But Philip doesn't argue with Nathanael. He doesn't try to persuade or convince. He simply says, *Come and see.* Philip does not need to prove Jesus. Jesus can do that himself. So, *Come and see.*

The next interaction we find here is between Nathanael and Jesus. Nathanael takes Philip's advice and locates this person who may be "the one" he has been searching for. As Nathanael approaches, Jesus announces, *Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!* It is possible that what Jesus is saying is, "Here is someone who speaks their mind, who does not try to hide what they believe. There

is nothing deceptive about him.” Jesus, of course, is referring to Nathanael’s belittling of Nazareth.

Nathanael is surprised by this and demands, *How do you know who I am?* And Jesus tells him, *I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.* We have no idea what this refers to, except that Jesus has a foreknowledge about Nathanael’s whereabouts.

Scholars have pointed out that it was common in Jesus’ day for rabbis to set up shop under the shade of a fig tree. If Nathanael was indeed under a fig tree, he was likely sitting at the feet of a rabbi studying the scriptures. We know Nathanael had been actively searching for the one spoken of by the prophets, so when Jesus says, *I saw you under the fig tree*, it all clicks. And Nathanael replies, *Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!* This is Nathanael’s epiphany. But he’s not there yet. Jesus asks him, *Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under [a] fig tree? You will see greater things than these. Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.* In other words, Jesus tells Nathanael, if you are impressed that I recognized you there is more. You are going to be privy to experiences much greater than that. Nathanael will have a Jacob moment when the reality of this existence is pulled back and he is able to gaze upon the workings of God’s kingdom.

Look carefully at Jesus’ words. Jesus says that Nathanael will see the angels ascending and descending not on a ladder, as in Jacob’s vision, but on the “Son of Man.” The Son of Man is the title Jesus gives himself. The Son of Man is the living link between heaven and earth. Jesus is that which is our connection to heaven. Jesus is the embodiment of God’s original covenant with Abraham. For us to see the workings of the kingdom, we don’t need to look for a heavenly apparition or some divine vision, we only need to look at Jesus. In him we see greater things. In him, we can find God.

In this story, Jesus calls Philip, Philip tells Nathanael, Nathanael is skeptical but goes to Jesus, Jesus convinces him and promise that he will experience even greater things.

As Christians, we believe in a world that can be more than what we find around us. As Christians, we possess the eyes that are able to glimpse the glory of God’s promise. We are privileged to see the holy in so many ways—in our national ideal that “all people are created equal,” in the transcendence of Michelangelo’s painting in the Sistine Chapel, in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, in the music of Mozart and of Billie Holiday, in the dreams of Dr. King, in the compassion shared between neighbors, in the gathered body of Christ as we pray “Thy kingdom come.” These are the greater things that drive us.

Nathanael would himself go on to see greater things. He would follow Jesus and he would watch as Jesus is executed by the cruel forces of this world—forces that refused to see. Eventually, Nathanael himself, on a quiet beach in Galilee, would experience the greatest epiphany of the risen, resurrected Jesus.

We are Christians. If anyone demands to know why you are a Christian, if they insist on interrogating you about what you believe, if they want you to convince them that something good can come out of this world, you don't have to prove it, you don't have to argue, all you have to do is invite them saying, *Come and see*.