

THE HOUSE OF THE FISHERMEN



The Story of Nathanael

Scripture

John 1: 35-51

35. The next day John was there again with two of his disciples.
36. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"
37. When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus.
38. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?" They said, "Rabbi," (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?"
39. "Come," he replied, "and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. It was about the tenth hour.
40. Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus.
41. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ).
42. And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter).
43. The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."
44. Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida.
45. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote--Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."
46. "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip.
47. When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."
48. "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."
49. Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel."
50. Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that."
51. He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."



TWO "THOUGHTS FOR THE DAY" TO BEGIN WITH

Here's some good advice for our competitive, star-struck society:

"Be a first rate version of yourself, not a second rate version of someone else." – Judy Garland

But more to the point this morning is a quotation from Pearl Buck":

"Once the 'what' is decided, the 'how' always follows. We must not make the 'how' an excuse for not facing and accepting the 'what.'"

– Pearl S. Buck

This week I sent that one to our Design Review Team, the group that is working on the “what” of our goals in worship, presentation, and evangelism. “What” are our plans to make our church attractive to other people in the community? The drawings Dan Bargar introduced last week are not just about facilities, but about direction. Once we refine them, the “how” will follow. I’ve seen it happen in three other locations where I have served.

FOR JESUS, “THE WHAT” WAS THE KIND OF PEOPLE who would provide leadership for ministry among the Jews and Gentiles in troubled times. Nathanael was one of the first disciples Jesus selected, because Jesus said that Nathanael was a man without guile.

“Guile” is not a word I use very often, but I think the word may sound more familiar to you in a few minutes. (“Guile” sounds like something secreted by your gall bladder ... well, those of us who still have one.) Jesus selected a fisherman as one of the first disciples by saying that Nathanael didn’t have any. (No, not a gall bladder.) Nathanael was someone who had whatever the opposite of guile might be.

I found seven references to guile in the New Testament. None of them positive. Guile was a beguiling problem in the first century. “Guile” means deceit, cunning, trickery, and deception.

The world into which Jesus was born was a world of political alliances, deception, cheating, double dealing.

To use a word that has been popular this month, Jesus said that God’s kingdom must be built upon trust, love and forgiveness. God’s kingdom would be populated by people who practiced transparency not guile.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A PERSON LIKE THAT?

He has achieved success who has lived well, laughed often, and loved much, who has enjoyed the trust of pure women, the respect of intelligent men, and the love of little children, who has filled his niche and accomplished his task, who has left the world better than he found it, whether by an improved poppy, a perfect poem, or a rescued soul, who has never lacked

appreciation of Earth’s beauty or failed to express it, who has always looked for the best in others and given them the best he had, whose life was an inspiration, and whose memory a benediction.

“Success” by Bessie Anderson Stanley – 1900’s
(Attributed incorrectly to Ralph Waldo Emerson)

THE FIRST DISCIPLES

**“When I was young, I admired clever people.
Now that I am old, I admire kind people.”**

– Abraham Heschel

What kind of people do YOU admire?

The scripture tells of the first people that Jesus admired. They were fishermen from cities on the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus said he would make them fishers of men.” Jesus said, “You catch them, and I’ll clean them.”

NATHANAEL

Jesus called out to Nathanael, “Here is a true Israelite,” probably meaning an observant Jew or at least one well educated in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Nathanael was baffled: “How do you know me?”

Jesus answered, “Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree.”

There was much more to this conversation than the Gospel records. The story ends with Nathanael’s recognition of Jesus as the Messiah.

Jesus responded, “You will see even greater things than this.”

It’s hard to imagine seeing something greater than the Messiah, unless it was the impact of the Messiah’s teachings.

Why was Nathanael sitting under the tree? Northern Galilee is a very spiritual place. There is something about the lake, the migrations of the birds, and the hilly vistas that makes Galilee a spiritual place to this day. Michener’s book, *The Source*, is about this area. And Safat, which is nearby, continues to this day to be a Jewish religious and intellectual center.

What a luxury it is sometimes, just to sit and think about your faith.

A poet tried to capture that moment:

Nathanael
You were sitting there meditating,
Thinking of God, gazing at the clouds.
The eyes of Jesus followed you
Where no natural eye could see.
The eyes of Jesus
Penetrated your inner being...
He saw your heart.
And what he saw, he liked.

TRANSPARENCY

Given the choice, surround yourself with friends who are **without guile - transparent**.

- **Men and women of integrity make good friends.**
- **Honest people make good friends.**
- **People who do interesting things; who plant; who give away; who read and travel make interesting friends.**

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN BEGINS WITH A GEOGRAPHY LESSON.

Take a look at the map on the cover of the bulletin and you can see the location of the House of the Fishermen. That would be Bethsaida, which means, "house of the fishermen," and it is the setting of our story. Fish gather near the bubbling tributaries of the lake. When I visited I found the remains of stone dwellings, the home of a vintner, and a main street for small shops. There is an interesting story about how this town that was first blessed by Jesus and later cursed by Jesus was rediscovered after being lost for nearly two thousand years.

BETHSAIDA IS LOST

Bethsaida is mentioned more often in the New Testament than any city except Jerusalem and Capernaum - this fishing village on the Sea of

Galilee simply became lost to history. Early Christian pilgrims went in search of it, but they had no idea where to find it.

The key to our identification of ancient Bethsaida was the realization that the site lies not on the Galilee shore but one and a half miles north of it. How can a fishing village sit so far from the water? The place where Jesus saw Nathanael watching birds or thinking about his own spirit had not moved, but over time the water level dropped.

THE FIRST VATICAN

A decade ago, it was discovered by Bargil Pixner (whose documentary I will show next Sunday evening) and right now some of the most interesting and active archaeological digs are taking place there. Wouldn't you love to go to Bethsaida and spend two weeks discovering the place where Jesus discovered the first disciples!

Pixner also identified a site on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee as the site of Bethsaida in a 1985 article, an identification which the State of Israel made official in 1989 after excavations in 1987. Pixner showed the site to Pope John Paul II in March 2000, declaring a key excavated from the site to be the "key to the first Vatican."

I have trouble with the assumption that the great Christian historic sites all belong to the Roman Catholic Church. I think they belong to us all.

NATHANAEL'S CHARACTER

The scriptures tell us four things about Nathanael's character:

1. He was a fisherman from Cana, and a friend of the three fishermen from Bethsaida. (John 21:2)
2. He was an eager man with an eager faith. He was a disciple of John the Baptist before he was a disciple of Jesus. (John 1:28)
3. He was a good Jew well versed in the Hebrew Scriptures. (John 1:45)
4. He was a man of prejudice, and assumed that people from Nazareth could not be good.

So when Jesus found him, Nathanael had enough background in scripture to know that the Hebrew Scriptures pointed to Jesus.

He did not say, "Look, I have found a man with a wonderful plan for your life." He did not say, "I

have found a person who will fix your personal problems and give your life meaning.” He said he had found the one to whom the Hebrew Scriptures pointed, who was the Messiah, the Christ. He is the Messiah, not a marriage counselor or psycho-therapist.

Nathanael had studied the scriptures, and yet, he was surprised when he found that they pointed to Jesus, the son of Joseph.

That revealed his prejudice. Nazareth did not produce great leaders, he thought. But then Jesus knew that we all have prejudice, and the job of faith is to overcome it.

PREJUDICE

Prejudices are feelings based upon preconceived ideas, regardless of facts.

When Paul used the image of blindness, he was referring to the same problem of prejudice. (2 Corinthians 4:3-4)

All sinful people have prejudice. After prejudice is confronted with facts, then people can move on.

Nathanael overcame his prejudice because of the last thing that Jesus said of him. “He was a man without guile.” With a sincere heart, he was looking for the truth.

HOW DOES IT END?

So what happened to Nathanael? Tradition says that Nathanael (who may also have been Bartholomew) preached in Persia and India and died the death of a Martyr.

He was part of the birth of the Christian Church. And he is proof that God can take a common person from an insignificant place and use him for God’s glory.

BE LIKE NATHANAEL

- People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered. Be like Nathanael and love them anyway.
- If you do well, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Be like Nathanael and do well anyway.
- If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.
- Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be like Nathanael and be honest and frank anyway.
- The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Be like Nathanael and do well anyway.
- The biggest people with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest people with the smallest minds. Be like Nathanael and think big anyway.
- People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. Fight for some underdogs anyway.
- What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.



Dr. John H. Cushman
Presbyterian Church of the Roses
2500 Patio Court
Santa Rosa, CA 95405
February 1, 2009