

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

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The Bridge

John 1:43–51

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

[Jesus] found Philip and said to him, “Follow Me.” . . . Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We’ve found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said, “Come and see.” . . . Jesus said to [Nathanel], “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (vv 43, 45–46, 51).

For Nathanael, whose other name is Bartholomew, it all started with a friend. I don’t mean a Facebook friend. It was a real face-to-face friend who was his bridge to Jesus. Another flesh and blood human being. The friend’s name was Philip. And it’s possible that Philip himself had first been introduced to Jesus by Peter. After all, they were both from Bethsaida. And Peter began following Jesus because of what his brother, Andrew, had told him, and Andrew heard it from John the Baptist. And that’s how it happens, isn’t it? One person telling another. Friend witnessing to friend. Brother inviting brother to meet the Messiah. Building bridges between people and Jesus. Evangelism doesn’t always go that well, but it is always that simple. There’s a “home mission” all around us—literally in our homes, or next door, or in the nearest cubicle.

This is where hope lies: in real individual relationships. Jesus didn’t need Facebook to get His message out. Or Twitter. Or Google. Or Parler. Or even telephones or telegrams or smoke signals. He used people. Faces as unique and beautiful as yours and mine. He used real human relationships. He used people opening their mouths to speak His name. And you’ve still got your mouth, right? We use our mouths to say all sorts of things, some beneficial, some not. Why not for this? Tell someone else about Jesus. Invite them to church. And many of you do. That’s one reason we often have guests and visitors who become friends and eventually wish to join our congregation, like the eight people going through adult instruction right now.

Right now some people are concerned about Big Tech and censorship and freedom of speech. Maybe you’re one of those people. It’s good and right to ask questions, make

arguments, and advocate for change where it's needed. But those platforms only have authority because we've given it to them. We've also made them more important than they need to be. There's no Big Brother or Big Tech listening in on the conversation you have with your neighbor. So a Twitter account was shut down or a Facebook page was removed. What impact does that have on your life? They can't shut down the relationship you have with your neighbor across the fence or with your hiking buddy or your client. And if everything goes to hell in a hand basket, let's be honest, those are the relationships that'll matter. We won't care about what so-and-so said on Facebook. The person next door will be far more important. It will be neighbors and face-to-face friends and local communities banding together to help and care for one another—providing meals and financial support and sharing skills.

For Nathanael it started with a friend. What about for you? Who was your Philip? It may have been your parents—having you baptized, bringing you to church, teaching you God's Word. Maybe you came to know Christ while taking an art class, or through your sister-in-law, or by knocking on a neighbor's door, or because someone helped you in a crisis. Sure, people can also find a church by searching online. It's even possible to listen to this sermon, learn good theology, and study the Bible over the internet, but there's also a whole lot of false theology and bad teaching out there. Many will be led astray. And, while it's better than nothing, we all know that virtual church isn't the same as being together in person. It's a poor substitute.

But back to Jesus, because that's where the text takes us. **Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We've found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph!"** (v 45). At last, the Messiah has come! This is it! He's here! But Nathanael isn't so sure. He has questions. He's not easily convinced. His first response is a skeptical one. Something isn't adding up. **"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"** (v 46). I wonder, is this an honest question? Or a dismissive one? Was he curious when he said it? Laughing? Mocking? Like me, you're probably ready to answer his question with a resounding "Yes!" Yes, good can come out of anywhere, so it can come out of Nazareth, can't it? But hold on. I don't why he thought that way about Nazareth. Maybe it had a bad reputation. Maybe it was a backwards, behind-the-times sort of place. Maybe it just lacked an Old Testament pedigree.

Sit with Nathanael for a moment. Chew on that question. Where does good come from? And something as good as the Messiah? Would you expect to find that kind of good in Nazareth? In the place you come from? Or would you expect to find in a place like that the same things you find in yourself—not what is good but what is defiled? It calls to mind what Jesus says in another place, **"For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness,**

deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person" (Mark 8:21–23). Maybe Nathanael just knew himself and what people are like everywhere, including Nazareth, and it wasn't good.

You and I might be tempted to make an apology for Nazareth. To say, "C'mon, Nathanael, it's not that bad." Or to make a list of the things it has going for it—oyster crackers, the mountain, the Old Mill, and so forth. Philip doesn't do that. He just says, **"Come and see!"** (v 46). You don't need to have all the answers. You don't need to have any of the answers. You don't have to convince someone to believe. Just be the bridge to Jesus. Invite them to come and see.

And what will they see? What does Nathanael find when he comes to Jesus? He finds someone who knows him. He finds someone who even knows what he's been thinking, who knows when he lies down and when he gets up, who discerns his thoughts from afar. **"Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!"** Jesus says (v 47). Though descended from deceitful Jacob, Nathanael is an honest Israelite. He is sincere about Israel's hope and salvation. How does Jesus know him? **"Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you"** (v 48). And that's when it clicks for Nathanael. Faith takes hold. **"Rabbi, teacher, You are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel!"** (v 49). That seems strange. We scratch our heads.

What's the big deal with the fig tree? What was Nathanael doing under it? Why would Jesus mentioning it be so significant? Under the fig tree was a place where people took rest for prayer, meditation on God's word, and study. Jesus had seen Nathanael in the word, searching the Scriptures, hoping and praying for the fulfillment of God's promises. But seeing Nathanael under the fig tree was nothing! The Son of God had known Nathanael long before that. He formed his inward parts. He knit him together in his mother's womb. His eyes saw Nathanael's unformed substance and marked the number of his days before they even began. And this is true not only of Nathanael but of all human life from conception to natural death. We must never deny the humanity of anyone—not of the unborn, or the elderly, or of any race, creed, or socio-economic status. All people, from the littlest to the oldest and everyone in between, all are fearfully and wonderfully made. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. Every life is precious, whether the world wants it or not. God made them. God loves them. Jesus died for them. And God wants them not only to live but to live forever with Him.

That's what our Lord wanted for Nathanael as well. And just what had he been studying and thinking about under the fig tree? What Jesus says next suggests that Nathanael had been meditating on Jacob's dream from Genesis. The one in which Jacob falls asleep with a rock as his pillow and then sees a ladder extending from earth to

heaven with angels going up and down on it. Jesus tells Nathanael that he will see greater things than that: **“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man”** (vv 43, 45–46, 51). Philip was the bridge between Nathanael and Jesus, but Jesus Himself is the bridge, the ladder, between heaven and earth. He connects what’s below with what’s above. He takes what is defiled and makes it pure through His forgiveness. **“There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,”** St. Paul says (1 Tim 2:5). He alone connects heaven and earth. As God, Jesus is from heaven; as Mary’s son, He is from earth. He connects both in His own flesh. He is the good that can and does come from Nazareth because He first came from heaven.

Nathanael would see Jesus as the bridge between God and man, between heaven and earth. He saw Jesus crucified. He saw Him hanging on the cross, paying for the sin of the world, reconciling God with man. As Jesus saw Nathanael under the fig tree, so Nathanael saw Jesus from under the tree of the cross. When the disciples climbed the ladder to help lift Christ’s body down from the cross, did Nathanael remember the first time he met Jesus? When the body was laid in the tomb, did he remember how Philip had said, “Come and see”? Their hopes were dashed until the third day when the call rang out again, “Come and see!” Come and see the empty tomb. He is risen! Nathanael hadn’t expected much good to come from Nazareth, from Jesus, but with Jesus He found a tree that brought salvation. He found a bridge from heaven to earth—a bridge that God crossed to bring Him home and to bring you home. He found peace and reconciliation with God. Real hope for our world is found in the individual, personal relationships that Jesus forms with sinners like Nathanael and like us. This is why we invite others to come and see.

And, when we die, the angels will ascend and descend on Christ to carry our souls to heaven. And when He returns and our bodies are raised on the last day, heaven and earth will be wonderfully united. The dwelling place of God will be with man. And we will see God—not virtually, not in a dream—but face-to-face.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
