

**The Second Sunday after the Epiphany, January 14, 2024**

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminster, Massachusetts

**Come and See Greater Things**

John 1:43–51

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

*Eph 1:2*


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At the end of today's Gospel reading, Jesus says to Nathanael: **"Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these. . . . Amen, amen, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man"** (vv 50–51).

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Following His baptism, which some of us celebrated last Sunday in the snow, Jesus begins His public ministry. First He calls and gathers disciples, as we heard in St. John's Gospel: **The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We've found Him—Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."** (vv 43–45)

## 3.

Well, whaddya think about that, Nathanael? He's surprised, real surprised, but not in a good way: "Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah? From *Nazareth*? You've got to be kidding. (v 46) **Can anything good come out of Nazareth?**" That's his response to hearing that all God's promises are being fulfilled in Jesus. Not exactly a ringing endorsement. You can feel his cynicism, skepticism, and negativity toward Jesus. Philip must be mistaken, yes, because it just doesn't make sense. It can't be. He doesn't trust what his friend tells him. He thinks he knows better. "Sorry to burst your bubble, Philip, but you're really off your rocker this time. The Messiah can't be from insignificant, nothing Nazareth—everyone knows that. God wouldn't work *that* way, not the Nazareth way. That's beneath Him." Oh, Nathanael has God all figured out, and his god will have nothing, absolutely nothing to do with Nazareth. With a response like that, you might even wonder if anything good can come out of Nathanael.

But Nathanael's not alone. At times, we could be his twin—quick to doubt, to second guess, to distrust, to go negative. Maybe that's how we naturally interact with others around us, even those closest to us. We start with questions meant to pick apart what's been said, comments meant to show how much we know, maybe not even in a mean or

spiteful way. But it's just that I know best. Things should be done my way. At the very least, I need to get my two cents in, so I'll assert my questions, I'll raise my concerns. What I think and have to say is clearly more important than what others have to say. Now we don't use those words, of course, but that's what we communicate.

And it goes deeper than that. We even think that we've got God figured out. We think we know how He should work, what He should want, what we ought to expect from Him. And if something goes wrong—if there's a death or an illness or a crisis—then He's the one to blame. "Why, the God I know wouldn't work that way; He wouldn't let that happen." So God is only allowed to act in ways that make sense to me? Of course, because I know what's best. I've got a certain view of how God should be, and I'll make Him conform to it. That's our fallen and stunted imagination at work—imagining a god for myself, who suits me, who measures up to my reason and desires. It's the consumer culture at work in religion. We treat God like fast food—I'll have him my way.

## 2.

To such doubts and distrust—yours and Nathanael's—Philip says the only thing he can: "**Come and see** (v 46). Come and see this Jesus of Nazareth." With Nathanael, we've often created a god to suit ourselves. Philip invites us to see God as He really is. And his words are just that—an invitation, not an argument, not an explanation. He offers no slam-dunk philosophical proof; only the words "Come and see." It's an invitation for us to see this Jesus at work. And it's also a way for us to invite others. The best witness is simply to let Jesus Himself be seen and heard. You don't need all the answers. So be a Philip to some negative Nathanael this week. Invite a friend or family member to come and see Jesus with you—to come here and see Jesus.

And y'know what? Nathanael accepts the invitation. Why not come and see? As he arrives, **Jesus sees Nathanael coming toward him and says of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!"** And **Nathanael says to him, "How do you know me?"** Without any exchange of greetings, even before an introduction, and never having met, Jesus knows Nathanael. He knows Nathanael's hopes for the Messiah. He knows what Nathanael he thinks of Nazareth. As Jesus explains, "**Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you**" (vv 47–48). When it was just Nathanael and the fig tree, Jesus saw him. What was Nathanael doing under the fig tree? Was he studying the Torah, the Old Testament Scriptures, as he longed for the days of peace promised through the Messiah? Or was he, like Adam and Eve, sewing together fig leaves to cover himself?

Either way, Jesus knows. He needs no binoculars, satellite pictures, hidden cameras. Who can see all things? Only God can see like that. So Jesus looks like a man and is a

man, but He also sees like God. As the Psalmist says of Him: **“O Lord, You have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You discern my thoughts from afar”** (Ps 139:1–2). Jesus sees all things, and He knows all things. Something good can come out of Nazareth; God can come out of Nazareth. That opens Nathanael’s eyes, too: **“Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”**

What do we learn from Nathanael: First, we don’t know and make sense out of God by our own reason or strength; rather, God knows and makes sense out of us. He discerns my thoughts and searches out all my ways. He sees me wherever I am—under the fig tree, at the kitchen table, in my study. Even before a word is on my tongue, the Lord knows it altogether. I can’t escape Him or control Him, and neither can you. A person can run from church. A person can avoid other Christians. But no one can hide from God. It’s not up to us to decide how God can and cannot be, to determine what is appropriate for Him. I don’t have Him figured out. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it. I can’t cut God down to size. I can’t force His word into a shape that suits me. Yet God does make Himself known to us, so that He can be seen and heard: He comes in the flesh as Jesus of Nazareth.

### 1.

But that’s hardly the end of the story. Nathanael witnessed a great thing in the revelation of Jesus’ divine knowledge. Yet Jesus says to him, **“You will see greater things than these”** (v 50). He continues, **“Do you remember from the Scriptures the story of Jacob’s dream, with the ladder extending from earth to heaven that had angels going up and down on it? Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man”** (v 51). The good news isn’t just that God knows Nathanael, or me, or you—for that would mean He knows my doubt and distrust and false gods. The good news is that in the face of such sinful skepticism, Jesus Christ has opened heaven to us. He truly knows us—all our dirt and all our secrets—and yet He offers Himself as the ladder between heaven and earth. What greater thing will Nathanael see? Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews, crucified for us and for our salvation, the death that props heaven open. No deceit was found in His mouth (Isa 53:9; 1 Pet 2:22) It’s truly a greater thing to see that God has died for me, to see and hear and taste the forgiveness, life, and salvation of Jesus’ death delivered to me.

Last week we heard about the baptism of Jesus. The heavens opened and the Father said, **“This is My beloved Son.”** Heaven is open and remains open, and God speaks to each of us as though we are His beloved ones because we are baptized into Jesus. All your sins were washed unto Jesus through baptism; you are clean. You’re told that

angels ascend and descend on the Son of Man because the God who was in heaven is now the God who dwells on earth in Jesus Christ. The angels came down to announce His birth, God in the manger. They are also here today to offer their worship and praise to the flesh-and-blood God who dwells in our midst, God on the altar. By His own words and promises, Jesus Christ is here—not just part of Him, but all of Him. “This is My body.” “This is My blood.” We take Him at His word. All of heaven joins with us in bowing before Jesus and singing: “Holy, Holy, Holy.”

HERE WE SEE THE “GREATER THINGS” PROMISED BY JESUS TO NATHANAEL.

What do you see? You see your sins washed away—forgiven—and life and salvation granted. Through your Holy Baptism, whenever you partake of Holy Communion, as you receive Holy Absolution, in listening to His Holy Word read and preached, heaven is open to you in Jesus Christ. Can anything good come out of Nazareth, or such water, or bread and wine, or words spoken from a pulpit? You have come, and now you see. Truly this Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, the King of Israel, our Savior.

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

*Phil 4:7*

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*Revised from a sermon preached at St. Paul’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana,  
on January 18, 2009, for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany*