

1 Samuel 3:1-10
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18
1 Corinthians 6:12-20
John 1:43-51

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SERMON: Blessed Assurance

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Summary: He knows us; He hears us; He loves us

John's gospel is often referred to as the 'spiritual' gospel, because its author is always first and foremost intent on showing his readers, not simply what Jesus said and did, but the meaning of what Jesus said and did. And moreover, not simply the meaning in some theoretical sense, as a historian might explain the meaning of the Civil War, or a literary critic might explain the meaning of a novel. John's interest is always in communicating to his readers the meaning for them of what Jesus said and did, given who Jesus was.

The opening words of John's gospel are of course familiar to all of us. Using the image of the Word to represent Jesus, John wrote: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And in all that follows, therefore, John wants us to reflect on the meaning for us of what Jesus said and did, because it is essentially the meaning, for us, of what God said and did.

Sometimes in John's Gospel, he represents Jesus Himself as unpacking that meaning through a long discourse; but other times, under the inspiration of Christ's own Spirit, John invites us to reflect for ourselves on what the meaning might be, undoubtedly because that reflection is itself an important part of our own spiritual conviction and growth.

And I think we find a lovely example of that in our Gospel selection for today in the meeting that takes place between our Lord and one of His earliest disciples, a man named Nathanael. So let's first read the selection, and then turn our thoughts

to that meeting, and what it means for us. And what I will suggest is that John is demonstrating, for our benefit, is three things: God knows us; God hears us; and God will reward us.

John 1:43-51

The meeting between Jesus and Nathanael takes place in the earliest days of our Lord's public ministry, during a period when, according to John's gospel, John the Baptist was still active, and on an occasion when Jesus has come to the river Jordan, perhaps the same occasion when he received John's baptism. The gospel writer is at pains to emphasize the profound effect that the presence and personality of this charismatic new preacher from Nazareth had on those who met him at this early stage, including John the Baptist himself. In fact, we learn that some of the Baptist's own followers were drawn to Jesus, an attraction that the Baptist himself apparently encouraged.

Nathanael was probably one of those followers of John, and when he is brought by his friend, Phillip, to meet this rabbi from Nazareth, Jesus says three things to him. And each of the three things Jesus says to Nathanael, I think, says something to each of us as well.

Let's read v. 47 again. *When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"*

Many times in John's gospel, the author is at pains to emphasize that Jesus could read the heart, that Jesus knew the inner thoughts, that Jesus could plumb the spirit of whomever he met. And here we find that once again. With no prior acquaintance, Jesus sees to the bottom of Nathanael's spirit, sees him through and through, and brings to light the most important thing about him. And as he so often does, Jesus quotes from the Old Testament to express his own thoughts. In the 32nd Psalm, we read, "Blessed is the man...in whom there is not deceit," a passage with which Nathanael would almost certainly be familiar.

So, in his very first words to Nathanael, Jesus assumes the mantle of the one who knows us through and through, the one who knows the truth about who we really are, and what we are meant to become, the one described in the psalm 139 that we already heard today:

139:1 O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

139:2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.

139:3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my

ways.

139:4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. 139:13 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. 139:16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

And for us, the assurance we receive is that Jesus – now glorified in heaven – also knows us, just as He did Nathanael, knows us in Spirit and in truth.

Each one of us existed as an ideal reality in God's mind before we took our first breath and released it as a baby's cry. Each one of us is a unique and special creation, destined for a unique and special glory. The world and circumstances into which we are born and through which we grow old warp all of us from that original ideal, lead all of us astray from that destiny, some of us very, very far away indeed.

But God does not forget, and it is that which God always sees in us, just as Jesus saw in Nathanael. And that is our first assurance. God knows us, who we really are, not what the world has made of us.

The next exchange between Jesus and Nathanael happens in vv. 48-49.

Nathanael said to Him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you."

Nathanael answered and said to Him: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You're the King of Israel!"

On the face of it, Nathanael's reaction seems a little unwarranted, doesn't it? Because Jesus says he saw him under a fig tree hardly seems sufficient reason to leap to the conclusion that the man talking to him is the son of God.

Yet if we fill the story out a bit, I think we see what John is teaching us. For Nathanael to have had that reaction, what else must have been the case.

One thing, obviously, was that he was alone sitting under the fig tree. He may have been out in a desolate place, or perhaps in a courtyard surrounded by walls...we don't know. But he most definitely was sitting alone.

And why would we have been sitting alone under the shade of the fig tree? We already have reason to believe that Nathanael was a pious man and a religious seeker, so it is surely safe to assume that he was engaged in religious reflection and

prayer as he sat under that particular tree, alone. Perhaps he was praying that God make his presence known to him, that God hear his prayers, that God see the condition of his need. You know, the things we all pray for?

And now it all makes sense. Nathanael is astonished and overwhelmed, because he realizes that the one to whom those prayers and thoughts and reflections had been directed, alone there in the garden, had been there with him, and was standing in front of him now.

And the second assurance for us, as it was for Nathanael, is that the one who knows us in our deepest reality is also the one who cares for us: who hears our prayers, who sees our need, who is always there, even when we are most alone.

He knows, Nathanael, he sees Nathanael, and our Lord's final assurance to Nathanael is perhaps the most precious of all. Let's reread v. 51.

And he said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Once again using an image from the OT with which Nathanael would have been familiar, an image borrowed from the story in Genesis about how Jacob had a dream in which a ladder – Jacob's ladder – appears between heaven and earth, Jesus opens up for Nathanael a vast horizon of possibilities far greater than any he could have imagined that day on the banks of the River Jordan. He assured Nathanael that his true reality of his nature – the man in whom there was no deceit – would bear witness to the true reality of heaven; he assured him that the one who hears prayers hears the true and understands the true and deepest needs out of which those prayers are spoken, and satisfy those needs in ways and eternities for which we have no words.

He knows us; he sees us; he loves us. What great assurance could we desire?

And so, heavenly Father, for this morning and this message, we pray for a heightened awareness of our origin in you, for a steady and peaceful awareness of your presence in our daily lives, and of the calm assurance that, come what may, you hold our futures in Your loving hands, the hands at once of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.