

“Nathanael—A Disciple without Deceit,”

John 1:43-51, Epiphany 2-B, Jan. 15, 2015

Everyone likes to receive a compliment, but there is never anything any better than to receive a compliment from Jesus, and certainly Jesus compliments his disciples at times too. Jesus compliments us when he says, “You are the light of the world!” Jesus compliments us when he says, “You are the salt of the earth!”

Jesus complimented that Roman Centurion one day for the greatness of his faith, when having requested that Jesus heal his sick servant some miles away, went on to tell Jesus he knew that he did not have to make that trip there in person. He knew that Jesus could heal from a distance: “Just say the word and my servant will be healed!”

Jesus certainly complimented that Syro-Phoenician woman one day, who had the ability to wring a “yes” out of Jesus “no,” when she pleaded for Jesus to heal her sick daughter. Even though she received some resistance from Jesus initially, who was testing her faith. Afterwards, Jesus also said to her, “Woman great is your faith!”

Nathanael also receives a great compliment from Jesus in our Gospel lesson today. Even before Jesus is introduced to Nathanael personally, Jesus pays Nathanael a big compliment in the presence of Philip when he says with respect to Nathanael: **“Behold, an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”**

When St. John tells us: “On the next day, Jesus decided to go to Galilee,” he is speaking to us about the day after he had first called Andrew and Simon Peter to be his disciples. On the day after that one Jesus journeyed northward to Galilee and there he found Philip, and said, “Follow me.” And what does Philip do? He goes immediately to a friend of his, a man named “Nathanael” and says, we have found the Messiah of whom Moses in the law and the prophet’s wrote, Jesus of Nazareth the son of Joseph!”

Nathanael must have followed Philip reluctantly, but when they both are approaching Jesus, Jesus probably startles Nathanael completely when he pays him a very kind compliment in the presence of all these other men, when Jesus hasn’t even ever met Nathanael face to face, so long as Nathanael can remember. Nevertheless Jesus Christ cries out with respect to Nathanael’s character: **“Behold, an Israelite, in whom there is no deceit!” (v. 47)**

If Nathanael was by nature a skeptical person, perhaps Jesus’ flattering comment did not set well with him at all initially. Perhaps Jesus’ unsolicited compliment was something that sounded much more to Nathanael like a sales pitch than it did anything else. Nathanael’s first presumption is to believe that Jesus must now be trying “to butter him up.”

If Nathanael had been willing to accept our Lord’s words for their face value, he probably would have called out to Jesus, simply, “Thank you!” But being the skeptical person that he was he asked a rather condescending question instead: **“Can anything good come out of Nazareth!”**

Philip said to Nathanael, “Come and see.” (v. 46)

Instead, in the manner of a truly skeptical person, he proceeds to ask Jesus a question that is just loaded with skepticism: **“How do you know me?”** And being the skeptical person he was, wouldn’t Nathanael have certainly imagined that he had just caught Jesus off guard. After all, who doesn’t like a compliment? And most people, at least when you first meet them, strive to be polite, even if it does seem that the one doing the complimenting is simply fattening them up for the kill of the sales pitch that soon will follow.

Nathanael was just not willing to accept the proposition set before him by his good friend Philip that Jesus was in fact the long-awaited Messiah; certainly not without any vital questions of this Jesus of his own. So he does his best to put Jesus on the spot. But Nathanael

certainly isn't prepared for Jesus' answer either. Rather than stumbling around to extricate himself from an uncomfortable reality, Jesus answers Nathanael point blank: ***"Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you!" (v. 48)***

Suddenly it dawns on Nathanael that Jesus is right, he does remember that he was stretched out under the shade of a gigantic fig tree, taking a nap when Philip came seeking his attention. Nathanael's brain is now working overtime! Quickly he calculates all the people he remembers passing by him as he rested under the fig tree, and for the life of him he certainly doesn't remember having seen this fellow Jesus there!

Perhaps, Nathanael, as he combs through his memory does remember seeing an old woman there with a water jar, or some noisy kids running around and chasing each other! But that's only other people that he saw. No one else had seen him there; Nathanael was sure, so how in the world could this fellow named Jesus have seen him there resting under that fig tree? Why Nathanael didn't even tell his own family that he was going to spend some time out there under that fig tree. And so therefore, all of a sudden, without thinking about the matter any longer, Nathanael's skepticism fall away from him like a peeling that is now stripped off of a banana! And next thing you know Nathanael blurts out: ***"Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"***

Now the tables are turned. Jesus is clearly in charge of this conversation now. Jesus speaks to Nathanael saying, ***"Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these!"*** Then after a pause, Jesus adds, ***"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)

It might be tempting for us to say, "Okay, so what?" Except what in the world does this story mean? What could Nathanael see that would be even more amazing than Jesus telling him where he had been only a few hours before? And how had Jesus done that? It had to be God, so at least Nathanael had settled that question!

But now Jesus is saying, ***"You think that was amazing! You haven't seen anything yet."*** And then Jesus says three very interesting things!

"Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened!" That would be amazing, but he keeps on going!

"And you will see the angels of God ascending and descending!" Remember angels? Every time they appear before people in the pages of the Bible, people are deathly afraid of them and fall down before them! That's amazing, but still Jesus keeps going!

"And you will see the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man!" Jesus always uses this designation to speak of himself and his true human nature, but how can angels ascend and descend upon the Son of God and Son of Man?

There is no other place in all of the recorded Gospels found in the New Testament where Jesus ever calls anyone else an "Israelite" Why? Because the nation of Israel wasn't really in existence anymore! Not during Jesus' day! Israel, as a nation, existed in the Old Testament era, but the northern tribes of Hebrew people who made up the northern kingdom of Israel had actually been gone now since 721 BC. Now they all lived in the southern part of Palestine known as "Judea," or the northern part of Palestine known as "Galilee," or "Samaria," but not in Israel!

But let me take a few moments to now remind you where the name "Israel" came from. God actually gave this to Jacob way back in Genesis 28, after Jacob had wrestled with God throughout one whole night in prayer. Jacob, you remember, was the son Isaac, who was the son of Abraham.

But long before Jacob had wrestled with God that night in prayer, he had proven himself to be a deceiver many times. He cheated his older twin brother Esau out of the birthright that was properly his

when Esau came home from a long hunting expedition completely famished one day and was so hungry that he couldn't think about anything else. Jacob, who enjoyed cooking, was preparing some porridge on an open fire probably in a cast iron kettle.

And then with the help of his mother Rebecca, he even deceived his blind father into giving him that birthright officially, by placing animals skins around his neck and on his arms, to appear to be more "hairy" than he himself ever could have been, when his father Isaac reached out to him to touch him, having also dressed himself up in some of Esau's smelly hunting clothes. Even his father Isaac asked him out right the nature of his true identity, but Jacob lied to his father and deceived him again.

One night as Jacob is on the run, he stops to make camp! He takes a stone and uses it as a pillow! He falls asleep, which if you used a rock for a pillow might make you have strange dreams indeed, but the dream Jacob has, not by accident, but by God's own provincial design is a doozy indeed! (Genesis 28)

He dreamed that he saw a stairway; that is a ladder with its feet planted firmly on the earth and the top of that ladder reaching all the way up into heaven! The angels of God were ascending and descending upon that ladder in Jacob's dream. Then, God appears standing at the top of the ladder or staircase saying, ***"I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac."*** (But the name of Jacob is not used here! Genesis 28:13)

Then God makes the same promise to Jacob (this man full of deceit; a deceiver) that he had made to Abraham and Isaac years before: ***"Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed! Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land! For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you!"***

But it's at this very point, you see, that God who was the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac, also becomes in actuality the God of Jacob—for real this time—not just in name only, but also because of the direct experience that Jacob now has with God, who had no doubt been taught all the correct spiritual truths by his family up to this point, but it just never really registered with him before!

Like a gold miner in search of gold for many years, but finally strikes a rich vein of gold in the ground, Jacob then says the most amazing thing! When Jacob awoke from his dream and sleep he makes the most astounding statement: ***"Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it!" and he was afraid the Bible tells us and continued to say to himself and to anyone else who might have been present: "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!"***

Jacob wisely and fearfully recognizes that God is in that very place. He takes the rock that was his pillow and uses it to make an altar. He then pronounces the name of that place to be "Bethel," which is the combination of two Hebrew words that means "The House of God!" And, perhaps, for the first time in all his born days, he actually worships God! He actually allows his spirit to become one with God's Spirit. Jacob feels that he is now being lifted up totally outside of himself and made one with the God who has created and redeemed him!"

Yes, Jacob is so overcome that he remarks, "This is none other than the house of God; and this is the very gate of heaven!" He actually like the Apostle Paul on another occasion, and the Apostle John on another occasion, had seen the doors of heaven opened and was privileged, at least momentarily, to take a good look at what he initially only saw!

Many of us when we were children in Sunday school learned to sing: "We are climbing Jacob's ladder! We are climbing Jacob's ladder! We are climbing Jacob's ladder, soldiers of the cross!"

And that's it—this is how Nathanael received the title from Jesus of being a “True Israelite!” All of a sudden in that moment, solely because of the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, who also one day led Peter to confess to Jesus also on the road to Caesarea Philippi, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” so here the Holy Spirit of God to sense that Jesus was God's new ladder being offered to heaven to him too!

The NEW JACOB'S LADDER, THE NEW CONNECTION BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH IS JESUS! THE ANGELS WILL ASCEND OR DESCEND; THAT IS, THE DOOR TO HEAVEN WILL BE OPENED FOR PEOPLE THROUGH JESUS AND HIS WORLD. The connection between heaven and earth that was completely severed with mankind's disobedience and rebellion has now been rebuilt through the perfect obedience of God's only-begotten Son our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

We are here today also, aren't we friends, at least most of us, because we believe that heaven is no longer a place of off-limits for us, and that earth is only a struggling chaotic mess, because in the gift of God's Son Jesus Christ, who teaches us to pray, ***“Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” has also brought a little piece of heaven into each of our lives!***

The cross that is planted so firmly on Calvary's hill reaches into the heaven. God meets his people on that ladder which only Jesus could climb. God meets his people in person in his only-begotten Son, “begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true Man born of the Virgin Mary, who redeemed us lost and condemned creatures, who purchased and won us from all sins, from death and the power of the devil, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with his holy precious blood and his innocent sufferings and death all that we might be his own and live with him in his kingdom in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity!” (SMALL CATECHISM, Luther's Explanation, 2nd Article of the Apostles Creed)

God meets his people in person. Renewing the covenant, embracing the fallen, choosing the scoundrels, the outcasts, the tricksters, all of whom have no chance at seeing into the gates of heaven without someone to bridge the gap. Amen.