

“Come See and Be Seen”

January 17, 2021
John 1: 43-51; Psalm 139

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From skeptic to believer in three verses and three minutes!
The story of Nathanael is delightful and curious. In a very short time frame – (I made up the three minutes, but it’s a good guess) – Nathanael has a radical change of heart. It begins with Nathanael saying: “*Nazareth? Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*” And it ends with Nathanael saying to Jesus: “*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!*”

That’s quite the transformation!

We don’t know too much about Nathanael, who is also known as Bartholomew in other parts of the New Testament. But it’s pretty clear that he was seeking and searching for a deeper connection with God.

How do we know? When Philip tells Nathanael “*We’ve found the one about whom it is written*”, you get the sense that they’ve had a conversation about this before. Kind of like when someone says: “We’ve found a local store that sells beautiful sock wool!” I wouldn’t share that out of the blue with Paul the chair of our board; but I might tell Shirley Avery or Janice Penney who are master knitters and with whom I’ve had some knitting conversations. Philip and Nathanael are from the same place and know each other. Likely Nathanael and Philip have been thinking and reading about the promise of a coming Messiah. Later, when Jesus and Nathanael meet for the first time, Jesus says to him “*I saw you under a fig tree.*”

“*Under a fig tree*” was an expression that meant that someone was studying and meditating on the scripture. Nathanael was seeking. I think that is significant. God is so very present in our world and in our lives, so it is not impossible that we might stumble upon God when we are not looking for God. *But the odds of encountering God go up considerably when we are looking.* Making an effort helps. Remember Jesus said: “*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.*” (Matthew 7:7)

Clearly Nathanael was looking for God, but what made him decide to follow Jesus? Nathanael clearly had doubts ... until he *knew* that God, through Jesus, was looking for him.

How do we know what to believe today? We live in a world of information overload. We are barraged by information. And it seems so difficult to know what is true and what is false. There is so much mistrust. We are constantly wondering, ‘Do I believe this? What should I believe?’

The first thing I want you to see in this scripture is that Philip doesn't give Nathanael a debate. Nathanael says "Nazareth? Are you sure? Can anything good come from Nazareth?" And how does Philip respond? That's right: "Come and see."

That's pretty impressive. I think I'd have launched into the 10 reasons why Nazareth is not such a bad place and why something good *could* potentially come from Nazareth. I might even google "famous people from Nazareth" to prove my point. In other words, I'd take the bait and enter full-fledged into a debate about the merits of Nazareth. I'd forget all about Jesus.

How often do you take the bait in conversation or especially on Social Media? Someone says something and you knee-jerk respond with what you believe. This happens when people don't even ask for an opinion. Some of the chats in community groups and pages are quite incredible and depressing. They make me wonder if Calvin was on to something with his doctrine of "total human depravity".

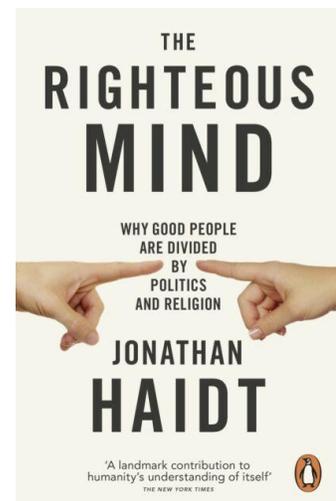
Often the debates get so nasty the topic ends up being taken down. How often do you think someone's mind is changed in one of these debates? I don't have any real evidence, but I'd be willing to guess the answer is almost never. Instead what happens is that people get more and more entrenched in what they believe.

The psychologist Jonathan Haidt wrote a book called *The Righteous Mind*.

It's a little dense but he helps to explain why we are so polarized in politics and religion and why it is difficult to change someone's mind about anything. He uses an image of a rider on an elephant to explain the challenge. The rider is reason or the rational mind and the elephant is our values, emotions and intuition. For the most part when you are riding an elephant you go where the elephant wants to go.

Instead of actually directing and controlling the elephant, mostly the rider (the rational part of us) serves to justify *why* you are going in that direction. We act, we believe and then we justify and rationalize that choice. The rider/rational part of us does have some influence on the way we think, behave and vote — but we way, way, way overestimate its influence.

Haidt argues that if we want to change another person we need to appeal not to their rational part, by giving them articles and a good debate;



but instead appeal to their elephant — the values that they are operating from.

Isn't that the way we often are as Christians? Instead of inviting people to come and see, we defend and argue our beliefs. We often get stuck in doctrine — what we believe — instead of pointing to God in Jesus. Philip and Jesus do not argue or present a detailed philosophy and ask people to believe; instead they invite Nathanael into a relationship. That changes everything.

I remember reading a sermon called "*We are Them*" written by Jeff Chu, a Christian author. In the sermon he relates a story about when he attended a protest at Westboro Baptist church. Westboro Baptist is known for being incredibly radically fundamentalist, even showing up at funerals of homosexuals with signs that say things like "God hates fags" and "It's too late to pray".

Anyway, Jeff Chu, who believes the opposite — that God created and loves gay people — went to one of these protests and started talking to one of the members. He ended up developing a friendship that helped each to understand where the other was coming from. Instead of being enemies, they both began to see the other as human.

Our task is not to talk or argue someone else into believing what we believe, but to invite them to come and meet Jesus, and experience a relationship with him themselves.

How do we do this? Learning how to share our God stories is part of it. Tell your story about how you experienced peace in an anxious time. Tell your story about how when you forgave that person, you felt set free. Tell your story about the love that surrounded you in a time of grief.

We have good news! I see a huge need in our culture for people to experience the love and life of Jesus in the context of an inclusive, welcoming and loving church community. There is just so much loneliness and disconnectedness and anxiety in the world -- why wouldn't we invite someone to experience a relationship that would make a difference?

What about us? How do we deepen that relationship? We too are called to sit 'under the fig tree'. One of the spiritual practices I have is reading the Bible every day. I tend to use the Bible in One Year (BIOY) app and it gives a psalm, a New Testament and an Old Testament reading. Another good one is called "Pray as you Go".

What I am doing especially with the New Testament reading is looking at who Jesus is and trying to get to know him better through the lens of scripture. In a world with so many voices and an overload of opinions, I am trying to root myself in Jesus in the scriptures. So lately I

have been asking: “Jesus, what are you like?” as I read the scripture. I try to journal about that so that I hear better what Jesus is saying to me. I find when I get my prayers out I can hear his voice more clearly, and there is a sense of a dialogue, of relationship.

“Come and see” is what Philip said to Nathanael. But even as Nathanael went to see Jesus, it turned out that Jesus had already seen Nathanael.

This is a funny little exchange that he has with Jesus. When he approaches, Jesus says to Nathanael: *“Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”* And Nathanael says *“How do you know? Where did you get to know me?”* And Jesus replies *“I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”* And Nathanael’s mind is completely blown!

This is not just, “Oh I noticed you in line at the Tim Horton’s.” There is something supernatural; miraculous in this exchange. In an instant Nathanael pivots from skeptic — who’s this guy from Nazareth? — to total believer. *“Rabbi, you are the Son of God! The King of Israel!”* That is no small claim!

For a devout Jew to proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God, the King of Israel — that’s huge! Jesus then says *“Do you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these. Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”*

In other words, Jesus is saying that he is the key to the connection between heaven and earth. Jesus is the revelation and the surest link to heaven.

It’s very likely that what Nathanael was studying and reading “under the fig tree” was Genesis chapter 28; where Jacob dreams of a ladder to heaven and angels. This story is one of the early and founding stories of the Old Testament. At this point Jacob, Abraham’s grandson, is a deceitful man. He has tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright and his blessing. So, here is Jesus comparing Nathanael to Jacob and saying, *“I know you, and unlike Jacob, you are not deceitful. But like Jacob you will see the presence of God. You will experience heaven coming to earth.”*

In that Old Testament story, Jacob wakes up from this dream and he says to himself *“Surely God is in this place and I did not know it.”*

Even before Nathanael met Jesus, God was in that place. There is nothing more incredible than realizing that God is right here with you and knows all about you *and* loves you.

I pray that you will seek God with all your heart and all your mind. The amazing thing is that when you do, you will discover that it is God who has

been seeking you all along. I pray that like Nathanael you will taste and experience that transforming power of relationship with Jesus, and I pray that you will share it with others.

Don't debate it with others ... share your experience and help them to come and see and to come and be seen.

Thanks be to God. Amen.