

You Will See Greater Things

John 1:43-51 (NIV)

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴ Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." ⁴⁶ "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip. ⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." ⁴⁸ "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹ Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel." ⁵⁰ Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." ⁵¹ He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man."

Imagine being in the crowd gathered at the Jordan River, seeing John decked out in his camel hair and leather belt outfit, looking every inch a prophet, listening to him, being baptized by him. Then during one sermon, he stops and literally points to a man saying, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) You got to see this great thing! At that moment, Andrew, having seen Jesus, goes and gets his brother Simon Peter to show off the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of the world! The next day, Jesus found Philip. He extended to him the invitation, "Follow me." (verse 43) Having seen Jesus, Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." (verse 45) He had to tell him the great thing, the great person, that he had seen.

Nathanael, though, had seen Nazareth. It was a nothing, backwater town. No prophecy that he could think of told him that something special would come out of a place like that. And so you hear his dubious retort: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (verse 46)

Do you think anyone says or has said that about us personally or about our church? "Oh, you go to Light of the Valley. Can anything good come from there?" Are we just this dinky little backwater not-with-the-times church for an insignificant niche of the population who call themselves Lutheran? Are we so insignificant and unnoteworthy that we can't actually have an impact on the people around us? Do people see nothing special when they look at us?

If this is what people see, then is there really any point in continuing? Are we going to barely trudge along until the day our niche demographic dies off? "Well, that's nice and depressing, pastor. Thanks for that." Hopefully none of you see us, yourselves, or our church like that. But maybe Nathanael made an unfiltered statement that sometimes does rumble about in our heads. Is there a little pessimistic voice that says, "Maybe we are nothing. Maybe there is too much to overcome. Maybe we will always be thwarted in some way, shape, or form and kept from success. Maybe there isn't a bright future for us or for this church."?

Jesus' outward appearance wasn't much of anything. By looking at him, you wouldn't say that this is obviously God Almighty and the Savior of the world. This is why John the Baptist had to point him out. This is why Philip wasn't going to argue with Nathanael about how valuable Nazareth was or wasn't. Instead, he wanted him to come and see.

Nathanael took up Philip's invitation. He came to see this Jesus guy from Nazareth. When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." (verse 47) Now that is quite the compliment. Jesus was essentially saying that Nathanael is a true believer in God and you can trust what he says. But how could he know that? This is the first time he's seeing Nathanael. Is he just giving me an empty compliment, some flattery to get him on his side? Is this assessment accurate?

If we came to see Jesus in person, what would we expect him to say as we approached? Would he say, "Here is one of the faithful few who's a hard worker and always pays his taxes on time?" "Here's a diligent student who never slacks in their learning?" "Here's a faithful, patient, fair parent who does their best in raising their child?" "Here's an obedient son or daughter who always honors their parents?" "Here's a person of pure heart who diligently reads, studies, and meditates on the Word of God?"

Maybe we would be flattered if Jesus said such things about us, but we know it would not be true. I've seen myself. I'm not those things. I don't do anything perfectly. I have many faults and failings in my life all the time. I'm like Nazareth. I'm nothing. I mean, really, what good can come from me? I can't change the world. I can't change this church. I can't even change myself. You shouldn't ever compliment me. I look at myself and I see so much bad, so much that could be done better. How can anything good come from me?

But, hold up a minute, Jesus doesn't do flattery. He doesn't tell you things you want to hear to make you feel better, to make you like him. To do so would be contrary to his nature, and, quite frankly, a sin. The Savior, the Messiah, doesn't do that. So when he saw Nathanael and said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit," (verse 47) it was meant in all honesty and sincerity.

How could God say that about Nathanael? We know enough about the human condition to know that, just as we see in ourselves, nobody is perfect and nobody can achieve perfection - no matter how hard they try. Certainly, Nathanael had told lies in his day, had stretched the truth, or at very least hadn't always been 100% honest with people.

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." (verse 48) Jesus saw greater things in Nathanael. Because he is God, he can see beyond what we can see. Not just literally, but even beyond what we see introspectively. Jesus saw through Nathanael for who he truly is. Because Nathanael had been brought to faith in God, because he trusted him to deliver him from his sins, maybe even a specific lie that he had been praying for forgiveness for while under the fig tree, Jesus saw him as one without sin. Through his God-given faith, Nathanael was delivered from all his sins. He was made complete and perfect in the sight of God. He was a true Israelite in whom there was no deceit because God had so delivered him.

We may hang our head in shame and not believe that we are at all perfect when we look at ourselves, but God sees something greater and he shows us these greater things. He sees us like he saw Nathanael. Last week God showed us that with simple water and his Word that he has killed our sinful nature, our Old Adams, and instead made us alive in him. He freed us from the control of our sin. With baptism, he clothed us with his perfection. God looks at you and sees something greater. He sees someone who is perfect, without sin, covered in Christ. When we take the Lord's Supper, we see little pieces of unleavened bread and grape wine - inexpensive and common things. Christ shows us greater things as he comes to us in this bread and wine, forgives us our sins, and draws us into fellowship, communion, with him. This is seeing, "heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." (verse 51) These simple things profoundly connect us to God and save us! These are the greater things that we have seen in this very church among this group of people.

This is why we are not some insignificant niche group of people as Light of the Valley. Here, we get to see greater things whenever the Lord's Supper is celebrated, whenever a baptism happens, whenever the forgiveness of your sins is proclaimed. Whenever these things are done, people are brought to God and made whole and complete before him. This is life-changing and earth-shattering. This is salvation. Can we see anything greater than that?

Maybe we don't look like a whole lot on the outside like Nazareth, but God is doing greater things here all the time. His kingdom is still expanding and gathering more and more people to God some 2,000 years later through Nathanael's and the other apostle's ministry handed down to us and all believers. Last week in the bulletin, you got to see some of those greater things. You saw that 10 people were baptized just last year, 16 professed a shared faith with us and joined our church, 95 people came for the first time, and we reached thousands of people with the Light of Christ through our Christmas invitations. There were people in each of our Christmas Eve worship services who told me that they had either seen our candlelight worship advertised or that they had one of our mug invites given to them. Seeds of God's saving message have been planted and watered in these people. That was you who helped make that happen. That's just one year. Consider also that we support our national church body and those in fellowship with us. We send them a portion of our offerings to continue spreading the Gospel message that Jesus took away the sins of all people everywhere. This affects not just our area, but throughout our country, and all over the world! The Lord is using us for greater things, and we get to see some of them.

God's not done there. In the end, all of us who have heard the Gospel, what Christ has done to take away our sins and cover us with his perfection, those who have been brought to faith in Christ, will see heaven with our own eyes - a day of no more sin, of no more suffering, of no more mourning, of no more death. We will see greater things, just as Jesus promised Nathanael. Amen.