

Sermon on John 1:43-51 (Healing and Hope)

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JOHN 1:43-51 (NRSV)

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida [beth-SAY-uh-duh], the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰ Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹ And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

SERMON

UPSET: In response to the violent insurrection of January 6, Bishop Saenz has asked us to observe this Sunday as a day of healing and hope. I'm all for that, but I want to begin with a closer look at this gospel passage which is the lectionary reading for this Sunday.

DEEPENING: Things go well for Philip in his encounter with Jesus, so Philip invites Nathan (that's what I'm going to call Nathanael today) to come and see. But Nathan is skeptical. He asks "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Nathan was probably referencing a local rivalry between the towns of Bethsaida [beth-SAY-uh-duh] and Nazareth. (Compare to: Abilene and Chapman.)

We don't know the depth of that rivalry. It could have been deep and divisive or light and friendly. The fact that the Gospel of John sees fit to include it makes me think it was probably much deeper and more divisive than that between Abilene and Chapman.

Whatever the nature of Nathan's quip, Philip doesn't let it derail him. He instead responds by inviting Nathan to "come and see." And Nathan does. Jesus reveals that he saw Nathan sitting under the fig tree and Nathan, the skeptic, is impressed enough to refer to Jesus as teacher, Son of God, and King of Israel.

Jesus asks Nathan ""Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree?" And then promises that "You will see greater things than these."

In that latter phrase, Jesus switches from the singular you to the plural you, "you all." There's ambiguity in our English translation, but in the original Greek it is quite clear. "You will see greater things than these" is a promise not just to Nathan, or even just to Nathan and Philip, but to all of us.

And that greater thing that we will see is "heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

But what does that mean? Well, Angels ascending and descending would have reminded Nathan of the story about Jacob, who slept and had a vision of Angels ascending and descending a ladder between heaven and earth.

When he awoke from the dream, Jacob said, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" and "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

Jacob named the place where he had slept Bethel, and it became one of the holiest sites in the worship of early Israel because it was understood to be a place where heaven and earth met, where God's dimension and our dimension overlapped and interlocked. Because of Jacob's dream, bethel became a place where you went when you were seeking to encounter God.

In metaphorically asserting that Angels will be ascending and descending upon him, Jesus is asserting that he is a place where heaven and earth meet, where God's dimension and our dimension overlap and interlock. Indeed as his ministry continues it will become clear that he is not just a place where this happens, but the place where it happens.

SUDDEN SHIFT AND GOSPEL: So, if we want to encounter God, we should seek out Jesus. For Jesus is the ladder, the connection between heaven and earth.

UNPACKING: But before Nathan could see Jesus, he had to overcome his aversion to people from Nazareth.

And now to talk about what happened on January 6. I don't think that we, as a nation, are ready to make nice. Peace and reconciliation require justice or at least a shared understanding of the truth about what happened and why. And we're not there yet. So I'm not going to make any broad statements about the healing of our nation.

What I am going to note is that the divisions that are already so wide on a national level, are widening at a local level also. Even at the level of this congregation, we are less willing to listen to one another, to hear one another out, to assume the best about one another.

But as far as I know, none of you stormed the capital a week ago. As far as I know, none of you took part in any of the riots that marred the peaceful protests this past summer.

And because of that, we, the members and friends of First UMC, are at a place where we can take hold of peace and reconciliation, we are at a good place to begin looking for healing and hope together.

Traditionally, this church has been a place where that happens, but it seems to get harder every year.

Nathan had the opportunity to encounter God in Jesus Christ only because he overcame his skepticism and perhaps even hostility at someone from Nazareth, and came to Jesus, whom he declared Son of God.

Nathan put aside his skepticism and his hostility and then found the One who is the way, the truth, and the life.

If we seek to encounter God in Jesus Christ, we must heed his commands and put aside our dislike and skepticism and hostility. We must do this in order to encounter those on the other “side” as children of God with whom we can set out to find the truth together.

That's a tall order and so I want to offer a first step. Stop getting your news from Social Media. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are great for keeping up with the activities of family and friends and dreadful for keeping up with the news. So find out how your Aunt's garden is doing on Facebook, but don't rely on something she cut and pasted from the friend of a friend to stay up to date with current events.

Instead, go to a reliable news source. I don't care if you turn to Fox or MSNBC or to *The New York Times* or *The Abilene Reflector-Chronicle*, all those possibilities are going to come closer to the truth than much of what you read on social media. I'm not saying traditional news sources are going to be perfect, I'm saying that, on average, they're going to be better.

Much better.

Don't rely on whatever comes your way via social media, go out and get your news, so that you know where it's coming from.

That's one good first step. Another, even better first step is to join in 100 days of prayer with United Methodists all over Kansas and Nebraska. The plan is to use a prayer from *The United Methodist Book of Worship* intended for use during a national crisis. It's printed in your bulletin and I invite you to pray with me now:

A Prayer in a Time of National Crisis

God of all the ages,
in your sight nations rise and fall and pass-through times of peril.
Now when our land is troubled, be near to judge and save.
May leaders be led by your wisdom;
may they search your will and see it clearly.
If we have turned from your way,
reverse our ways and help us to repent.
Give us your light and your truth, let them guide us;
through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of this world, and our Savior. Amen.

— *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 517

Resources Consulted Included: *Preaching Through the Christian Year B* by Fred B. Caraddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker; *A Lector's Guide and Commentary to the Revised Common Lectionary — Year B* by J. Ted Blakeley; *John for Everyone* by N. T. Wright, and *Texts for Preaching: a Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV — Year B* by Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, and James D. Newsome.