

# Disciples

## John 1:43-51

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, 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."

In my small home church, there was a specific way that we though disciples were made. First the congregation conducted a spring or fall revival. That is when they invited an evangelist to preach five evenings. The subject was giving your life to Jesus. All the "unsaved: or "unbaptized" in the audience were invited to sit on the "mourners' bench." At the end of each night's sermon, there would be an invitation to discipleship. If no one came forth to accept Christ, the mothers of the church would pray for those seeking salvation. They would pray that God would soften their hearts of those in attendance and would make them receptive to a life of discipleship with Christ.

When the person did "confess that they needed Jesus and submitted to baptism," the real work of disciple began. There was Sunday school, prayer meetings and weekly worship. They were encouraged to have their own time of daily prayer and Bible study. I'm not sure where we came up with this model, but it was what was used in that congregation and many others in our area.

I am aware that other congregations and religious groups use different models. One is where people who state interest in church membership or teens of a specific

age, participate in a class that teaches them about church membership and at the end of this series of classes, all who state interest are baptized and become members. They are also encouraged to continue studying and worshipping together and individually. In some churches the baptism happens first and then the intense study. These are all different ways for people to become learners, followers and disciples of Christ.

Before our reading from the Gospel of John, at least three people had chosen to follow Jesus. Andrew, his brother Peter, and an unnamed disciple of John the Baptist were already followers. The call of the disciples in John's Gospel is about the cosmic Word (Jesus) teaching his followers about the reign of God, and them witnessing his signs and wonders. Contrary to all human expectations, God's very own eternal Word is made available to us wayward creatures in the life of a human being from Nazareth.

The passage begins with no obvious indication that Jesus is anything other than an ordinary human. In this initial episode Jesus has performed no miracle, shown no sign, and engaged in no teaching. Jesus has presented no proclamation about the reign of God that could excite the imagination of Philip or anyone else. Philip has no evident reason to find Jesus to be remarkable. He is just Jesus from Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

Jesus finds Philip, and Philip finds Nathanael. Philip does not take the opportunity to subject Nathanael to a long homily full of messianic proofs. He makes the best possible invitation both then and now: "Come and see" (John 1:39). This may be the reminder for us that one-size-fits-all evangelism is unduly rigid and insufficiently attentive to the winds of the Spirit. Philip deals with Nathanael quite differently from how he deals with the Ethiopian eunuch, but in each case Philip—with the Spirit—leads a new follower to the Master.

The fact of Jesus' humble and human origins initially causes Nathanael to scoff at Philip's invitation to come and see Jesus. Nazareth was a village of 200-400 people. Like several other villages in the area, it was economically dependent on the city of Sepphoris, which was the capital of Galilee in the first years of Herod Antipas's reign as tetrarch. The Hebrew Scriptures never mention Nazareth, much less associate it with messianic expectations. Nazareth, then, lent no special status to its inhabitants, so when Philip told Nathanael that Jesus was the one of whom Moses and the prophets wrote, Nathanael concluded that Philip had to be mistaken, since Jesus was the "son of Joseph from Nazareth" (John 1:45). In Nathanael's view, Jesus could be nothing more than a simple Jew from an insignificant village in Galilee. The Messiah would certainly be of more prominent parentage and come from a more significant town.

Galilee had no association with any Jewish messianic expectations. In the period of the Israelite national states, it was part of the kingdom of Israel. Those who harbored royal messianic expectations believed that the Messiah would come from the territory of the former kingdom of Judah.

Nathanael is honest enough to express amazement that God's Messiah could come from an insignificant village. This suggests that God can accomplish great things in unlikely places. Also, God is perfectly capable of honoring ordinary people and apparently insignificant places. Scripture and our own experience bear witness to the fact that with God's help even dinky places like Flint, Michigan or Wardell, Missouri can nurture greatness.

The Gospel of John reinforces the genuine humanness of Jesus, insisting that Jesus is a real person, who thirsts, gets hungry, sorrows, and dies. Nevertheless, in this passage Jesus the son of Joseph is also hailed as the Son of God and the King of Israel. Here Jesus is described as the fulfillment of the hope of Israel, of both the Law and the Prophets, implicitly of the entire Hebrew Scriptures. Nathanael's

confession indicates that these titles evocative of divine power apply to the human being from Nazareth. The overwhelming shock is that this person whose earthly origins can be identified, this Jesus, elicits a response appropriate to God.

The application of the titles Son of God and King of Israel to Jesus is justified by his exercise of divine power and royal authority. Such power and authority are evident in his ability to awaken in people a believing response not based on empirical evidence. Philip simply hears the imperative "Follow" and obediently does exactly that. Even more dramatically, Nathanael, with no verbal command from Jesus, comes, sees, hears, and spontaneously follows. Jesus is already exercising royal authority over Philip, Nathanael, and all like them who believe and obey. Theologians from John Calvin to Karl Barth have noted that in this passage the following of Jesus is not the fruit of any individual's deliberation and choice. Here confessing Jesus seems to follow with a certain necessity from merely seeing or hearing him. In any case, the common theme is that the encounter with Christ is the potent force that propels Philip and Nathanael; it is the sheer presence of Christ that draws them.

Jesus' critical role is as the revealer of God. Jesus' call of Philip and Nathanael is not so much a call to mission as it is an invitation to know God. An encounter with Jesus invites us to see the "angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (v. 51). Ever since Augustine, theologians have perceived a connection between this image and Jacob's vision of the ladder of angels at Bethel (Gen. 28:10-17). This is reinforced by Jesus' description of Nathanael as an Israelite in whom there is no guile. Traditionally, Jacob's new divinely given name, Israel, was taken to imply that he was the personification of God's people rapturously beholding their God. Jacob, however, was regarded also as a man of guile, deceitful, and cunning. Jesus' address establishes Nathanael as the new Jacob, as the ideal Israelite. To further support the parallel, Jacob was also

remembered as the one who saw God face to face and was utterly transformed by the encounter (Gen. 32:30). Consequently, individuals like Nathanael who behold Jesus are seeing the very face of God, just as Jacob did. Jesus the Son of Man is the ultimate ladder stretching between heaven and earth. Jesus is the point of contact between the finite and the infinite, the conjunction of time and eternity. Jesus is the place where the heavens are opened and the divine glory can be contemplated. Similarly, Nathanael as the guileless Jacob, the true Israelite, is the prototype of a new humanity reborn in Christ.

Nathanael is excellent disciple material because he is without guile. Nathanael would make a terrible poker player but a wonderful friend. God thus honors the qualities of honesty, genuineness, integrity, and open-mindedness. This is not one of those cases where God takes a miserable sinner and turns him into a saint. This is one of those equally remarkable cases where God takes a person who is humanly praiseworthy in every way and makes of him something even more—a disciple. The fact that Jesus, who has never met Nathanael, knows of his integrity suggests that here, as always in the Gospel of John, Jesus can read people's hearts. He is the light that illumines every person—he not only gives each person light; he sees each person in his or her true light (see John 1:9).

This manifestation of the divine to Philip and Nathanael is seen as the initiation of the disciples into an extended process that would eventuate, as they were promised, in the full beholding of God's glory and would blossom into an unmediated vision of glory. Of course, such vision required the unfolding of the full narrative of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, where the heavens are indeed opened. **Lee Barrett**

As disciples, studying and growing, talking and listening and reaching out to talking and listening and reaching out to God, we truly learn that Jesus is the Lamb of God (v. 36), rabbi (v. 38), Messiah (v. 41), "him about whom Moses in the law

and also the prophets wrote" (v. 45), son of Joseph from Nazareth (v. 45), Son of God (v. 49), and King of Israel (v. 49). He is also both the Son of Man promised in Daniel 7:13 and the ladder between heaven and earth in Genesis 28:12. As we learn to humbly walk with Jesus, we learn that God has already chosen humankind, through Christ, to be the heirs and recipients of new life. However, as people of faith, we must also chose God. Discipleship consists in following Jesus (sometimes all the way to the cross: John 21:18-22).

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Westminster John Knox Press. Retrieved from <https://app.wordsearchbible.lifeway.com>]