

Greater Things

John 1:43-51

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46) This was the question that Nathanael posed to the enthusiastic Philip. The Gospel of John presents most of Jesus' contemporaries making the same mistake as Nathanael in appraising Jesus and his message. They assumed that Jesus' origins could explain who he was. Nathanael's skepticism about the claims made for Jesus by his first followers allowed Jesus to suggest to Nathanael that his first impression was seriously flawed. Even when confronted by the Divine, it is possible for us to be oblivious to God's presence in our lives.

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' reign as tetrarch. The Hebrew Scriptures never mention Nazareth, much less associate it with messianic expectations. 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. The Fourth Gospel highlights these beliefs by having Jesus' enemies assert that the

Messiah would belong to David's family and would come from Bethlehem (see [John 7:42](#)).

You and I know that Jesus had another origin of which Nathanael was unaware. While Jesus was indeed "the son of Joseph from Nazareth," he was also the Word made flesh who was with God from the beginning and was God ([John 1:1-14](#)). We know of Jesus' true identity from the very beginning of the Gospel of John. Jesus' opponents never accepted Jesus, because they were unwilling to see beyond appearances. This is the great tragedy of the Gospel of John: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" ([John 1:11](#)). The disciples were able to accept Jesus as the Messiah because Jesus chose them "out of the world" ([John 15:19](#)).

Though Nathanael at first maintained that Jesus could not be the Messiah, his first encounter with Jesus changed his mind. Jesus' foreknowledge was what convinced Nathanael that he was in the presence of an extraordinary individual whose origins, as far as Nathanael knew them, did not do him justice. Nathanael addresses Jesus as "rabbi" and confessed that he is the Son of God and the King of Israel. Jesus' response was that Nathanael will be a witness to greater things than a display of precognition.

Jesus then gave Nathanael an insider statement by an allusion to Jacob's dream near a town called Luz ([John 1:51](#); see [Gen. 28:10-19](#)). Jacob dreamed that he saw angels ascending and descending on the ramp that stretched from heaven to the place where he was sleeping. Jacob recognized that he was in the very presence of God. Indeed, he renamed the place where he was resting Bethel, "the house of God." This allusion identifies Jesus not merely as a messenger from God, but as the means by which human beings can have an authentic encounter with the divine. When Nathanael had this experience as promised by Jesus, he knew Jesus as he really was—not just

the son of Joseph from Nazareth but the Word of God in the flesh. The writer of John wanted his readers and us to see ourselves as heirs of the promise Jesus gave to Nathanael. **Leslie J. Hoppe**

You may ask: Why did Nathanael decide to go with Jesus? Perhaps because of Philip's testimony, but the deal was sealed because Jesus had gifts of perception that are more associated with divine life than human life. Jesus seemed to suggest that Nathanael was easily impressed. Wait until he sees how this story turns out. This suggests that the wonder of Jesus' special knowledge is of little import compared to the wonder of God's using Jesus as the one who comes from heaven and returns to heaven again. The great sign was Jesus himself and the way he reveals the Father. God's greatness exceeds what we have already seen and what we can imagine.

A lesson we learn: John's Gospel and the Synoptics agree on this crucial point: it is not enough to believe in Jesus. Discipleship consists in following him (sometimes all the way to the cross: see [John 21:18-22](#)).

A lesson we learn: Jesus finds Philip, and Philip finds Nathanael—our best evangelists are often the most recent converts! Philip does not take the opportunity to subject Nathanael to a long homily full of messianic proofs. He makes the best possible invitation for evangelism both then and now: "Come and see" ([John 1:39](#)).

A lesson we learn: 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.

A lesson we learn: God can accomplish great things in unlikely places. As is often the case, we are enabled to see the irony of Nathanael's question: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (v. 46). The answer is, "Indeed."

A lesson we learn: God is perfectly capable of honoring ordinary people and apparently insignificant places. Scripture and our own experience bear witness to the fact that Central and Community churches have nurtured greatness in Mark O'Brien, Jean O'Brien, Jeanne Wisenbaugh, and others.

Elton W. Brown

We like the disciples, John, Peter, Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael testify to Jesus, but we don't know the half of it. Philip told Nathanael that the one "about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote" was this "Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." We know that Philip's testimony fell short of the reality of Jesus. And still, somehow Philip's testimony led Nathanael to "come and see." Hopefully this story inspires us to share what we know and invite others to meet the Christ. **Ted A. Smith**

Sometimes our preconceptions of God and God's activity can prevent us from an authentic encounter with God. I believe when we walk closely with Jesus our insight become deeper and we begin to see how God is working in the world. We will still see the pain and suffering – for these are real – but we will also recognize the blessings, the peace, the joy, and the salvation that he gives – and we will see the greater things as Jesus becomes the son of Joseph, the fulfillment of the hope of Israel, of both the Law and the Prophets, the Son of God and the King of Israel in our lives.