

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

“MEETING THE UNEXPECTED”

John 1:43-51

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

By Steven E. Albertin

43The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” 44Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45Philip 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.” 46Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” 47When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” 48Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” 49Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” 50Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” 51And 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.”

Diagnosis: “Unexpected Judgment”

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : “A Faulty Assumption”

Philip seems to be excited by his discovery and wants to share it with his friend, Nathanael. He believes that Jesus is the One that Israel has been waiting for, the Messiah. But Nathanael like so many of us doesn't get it. He is blinded by his faulty assumptions concerning not just the Messiah but the way God relates to this world. He assumes that God appears only in the big, the glitzy and the glamorous. A flashy miracle would get his attention but not this fellow from Nazareth. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nazareth is your proverbial hick-town, wide-spot-in-the-road-and-don't-blink-your-eyes-when-passing-through-because-you-might-miss-it sort of town. Just like us in our celebrity-driven world, where you always expect important people to come from important places, Nathanael just assumes that God wouldn't waste his time and send his chosen One from a place like this in Galilee, a place no better than the hollows of Appalachia.

In the grip of such a faulty assumption, distorted by such a bias, like Eli in today's Old Testament Reading, he/we can't believe that God would bother to speak to us in the voice of this still-green-behind-the-years boy, Samuel, . . . or in a babe lying in a manger or in a wandering teacher with no place to lay his head or in a crucified would-be messianic or in ordinary water, simple bread and wine or, most of all, in the despicable human beings that we sit next to in the pew on Sunday morning. We assume that almighty God, the creator of heaven and earth, wouldn't bother to stoop to such desperate means. After all, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *"A Faulty Faith"*
Nathanael was not just biased, prejudiced and blinded by his faulty assumptions about God. His faulty assumptions were the result of a faulty faith that was hardly faith at all. Nathanael believed in a God who has great power, who is capable of flexing his muscles and doing extraordinary things for him and his

benefit. That is the kind of God he wants to believe in. So, Nathanael is impressed and pleased by such muscular deeds of power when Jesus is able to decipher his personality without ever having met him. "Where did you get to know me?" How did Jesus ever know that he was an Israelite in whom there is no guile? Even more so, Nathanael is impressed that Jesus had the power to see him under the fig tree even before Philip called him. Wow! This guy is something special. "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel?"

But Jesus is not impressed. Faith that believes "because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree" is hardly faith at all. Who doesn't believe that God is powerful and mighty? Even the devil believes that about God. Such faith is what the Lutheran Confessions dismiss as "historical faith." Even the devil believes such "historical facts," that Jesus was born in a manger, suffered and died and rose again. What the devil doesn't believe is that Christ did these things "for him." The devil like Nathanael is only impressed with power. Such faith is a far cry from the "trust" that Jesus truly wants from Nathanael. But to "trust" means that you are willing to forsake all and put yourself in the hands of another. Nathanael like the devil and so many of us is unwilling to do that. Instead we want a God whose power can vindicate us just the way we are. That is not "trust" in God but "trust" in ourselves. That is not just faulty faith. That is not faith at all.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : "At Fault"

Nathanael stands for every one of us who wrongly assumes that God can't be in the small, the weak and the ordinary. Such a faulty assumption is based on a faulty faith that is no faith at all. Yet, ironically like Nathanael we naively assume that it is good news if God knows everything about us and is able to see us even when we are distant and under the proverbial "fig tree." Nathanael actually thinks it is wonderful that Jesus was able to

see him not only under the fig tree but also deep into the truth of his heart.

But what if what Jesus sees in us is not so great? What if he is able to see how faulty our faith really is? What if he is able to see all the secrets and skeletons we have hidden in the closets of our souls? That can hardly be good news. That can only mean criticism, judgment and fear for us who are clearly at fault for our faithlessness.

Nathanael would never have expected this kind of judgment. He was ready to “blow off” Philip and his ridiculous claim about who Jesus was. Neither Philip nor Jesus could be taken seriously. After all, nothing good could ever come out of Nazareth!

And surprisingly, unexpectedly, Nathanael is right! Nothing good could ever come of this . . . for Nathanael! He has made the wrong call. His faulty assumption based on his faulty faith make only him at fault. And when you are the one who is at fault and who can never hope to find a “fig tree” far enough away under which to hide and who is unable to escape from the ever-present and prying eyes of almighty God, you are in big trouble . . . doomed!

Neither Nathanael nor we expected to be judged like this!

Prognosis: “Unexpected Grace”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *“Unexpected Life”*

After being so roundly exposed for being at fault, Nathanael must have expected the worst. We certainly do every time we are exposed for the sinners that we are. Nathanael may have thought his confession impressed Jesus. But Jesus wasn’t impressed, Nathanael must have wanted to run and hide. But then Jesus must have stunned Nathanael with his unexpected graciousness. Instead

of hammering him, Jesus forgives him. And he does that not by directing Nathanael to greater acts of divine muscle flexing but to Jesus' own impending suffering and death.

First, in language that clearly would have caught the attention of every faithful Jew who knew his Bible stories, Jesus directs Nathanael's attention to another story where a sinner was exposed and found to be at fault: Jacob. Jacob was painfully aware of his shortcomings and was fleeing for his life when at Bethel in the middle of the night he dreams of that ladder on which angels were "ascending and descending" between heaven and earth. And just when he expects God to give him what he deserves, God offers him that same wonderful promise of grace that had previously been given to Abraham and Isaac. That same unexpected grace is now offered to Nathanael, precisely at the same moment when he had been embarrassed and shamed for his faulty faith.

Second, as the Gospel of John unfolds, it will become increasingly apparent that Jesus would become another "Jacob's ladder." He would literally connect heaven and earth. Jesus would be the one who would open the heavens and through whom God's mercy would be poured out upon the earth. And just as it had always been in the life of this ignoble and obscure One from, of all places, . . . Nazareth, it would be on a cross, in the shedding of his own blood, in the most unexpected of events, his own death, that God would forgive Nathanael and us and all those well-meaning sinners who hold faulty assumptions, based on a faulty faith and are absolutely at fault for their plight. Nathanael thought he had seen Jesus do great things when Jesus miraculously saw him under the fig tree. But "he ain't seen nothin' yet!" Jesus promises him that he would see an even greater thing when he would see Jesus die on the cross. Ironically, through such "losing," Jesus would vindicate Nathanael's claim that he is "the Son of God" and "the King of

Israel.”

In the grips of his old faulty faith Nathanael would have never expected anything like this. If anything after being exposed, he expected the worst, perhaps even his own death. But surprisingly, unexpectedly the same one who threatened him now unexpectedly offers him (and us!) life, a second chance, a fresh start!

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : “Unexpected Faith”

This amazing promise fulfilled in the death and resurrection of this One for whom expectations were quite low (because nothing good can ever possibly come from the Nazareth’s of this world) has the power to help the Nathanaels of this world “see” what had previously been invisible. Faulty faith-ers like all of us finally “see” what had previously been overlooked: God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The faulty faith-ers, who previously had been infatuated with power and might because they couldn’t bring themselves to let go and trust another, now are able to do the unexpected. At last they believe. At last they trust. At last they are able to let go of themselves and their pretensions (that is, repent!) and trust in a God who is “for them” no matter what.

Such unexpected faith enables Nathanael and us to “see” God “for us” where previously our faulty assumptions had prevented us from seeing and believing in a God who was “for us.” At best we could only “see” a God who was “against us.” Now we can deliberately look for God in the small, the weak, and the most unlikely and ungodly of places. Now we see God “for us” in that loser from Nazareth, in ordinary words spoken by ordinary humans, in ordinary water poured, in ordinary bread broken and wine poured, in the midst of our own suffering . . . and even in those folks sitting next to us in the pews of our churches whom

we know all too well have faults in their lives and skeletons in their closets.

In a world where everyone expects to have their faith in God nurtured by the spectacular and miraculous, we unexpectedly have our faith nurtured by just the opposite: by our lowly and struggling congregations that never seem to be able to impress anyone in this world with their power and prestige yet are able to persist and change lives. But that is the way this God works who sent his Son from Nazareth. Talk about the unexpected!

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *“Unexpected Fate”*
Unexpectedly lives, destinies and fates . . . are changed! Not only is our fate changed because now we can “see” what we were unable to “see” before, so also are the fates of others changed.

Philip wanted Nathanael to “come and see.” When he first “came,” he could not “see.” But after an encounter with Jesus, he was able at last to “see.” He now had a whole new set of assumptions about God and God’s presence in the world. Not only was he able to “see” that something good, very good, could come from, of all places, . . . Nazareth, but also he was able to see even “greater things.” Being able to see a universe filled with the unexpected grace of God, changes everyone’s fate, not only for Nathanael but for all who are able to “see” like him. Those who have such faith have had their eyes opened and are able to live life with a whole new set of assumptions. They are no longer willing to live their lives in the same old ways. It is “no longer business as usual.”

Nathanael disappears from the pages of the New Testament after this story (tradition suggests that he might also have been Bartholomew). If his life was like that of any of those other disciples who learned to “see” Jesus all over the place, then he was also able to change the “fate” of others. Under the old set

of assumptions there were those who seemed to be least like God, the poor, the naked, the hungry, the thirsty, those in prison. Such god-forsaken people are to be avoided. But now they are the very embodiment of the One from Nazareth (Matthew 25). Nathanael and those like him, (and hopefully folks like us!), can't help themselves. For them it is a privilege, an honor, a "get to," to be able to change the fate of these losers from Nazareth. Loving them, is loving the One from Nazareth. As a result, those, who often have grown quite accustomed to being treated as if they too were losers from Nazareth, are surprised. They never expected to be treated like this. Their fates have been unexpectedly altered by those whose fates have also been unexpectedly altered by the unexpectedly altering Grace of God.

Don't ever assume that nothing good can come out of Nazareth! For in the One from Nazareth we surely will . . . Meet the Unexpected!