

# Second Sunday after the Epiphany

**MEET THE NEW JUDGE, NOT THE SAME AS THE OLD JUDGE!**

**John 1:43-51**

## **Second Sunday after the Epiphany Analysis by James Squire**

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?" 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."

*NOTES: In today's Old Testament lesson, young Samuel hears voices and runs to Eli who is so slow on the uptake that it takes 3 such encounters before he finally realizes who it is that is really calling Samuel. And then he wishes he had slept through it all when he finally hears the word of the Lord*

*through Samuel. Our Psalmist for the day is literally overwhelmed by God's presence in his life. He feels crowded with no escape. Then there's Nathanael, recruited by Jesus through Philip. The recruitment is lost on Nathanael; the attraction is nil.*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Hounded by the Unknown God**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *On the Defensive*  
God enters our world unknown. That seems like a problem for God, except that it is really God's world, not ours, and we are his—for he created us. So the problem is really ours. The atheists among us are the most brutally honest of all: any god worth his salt should show himself (for instance, by hailing from Jerusalem, not some puny hick town like Nazareth) if he expects to gain our respect. We churchgoers and nominal believers go along with our indoctrination even though our hearts are truly with the atheists'. Even if we buy into the prayer-thing, we expect it to pay off in some obvious fashion. Like Nathanael, we are wary when Philip comes around to announce the answer to all our prayers. Our response? "Show me," as they say in Missouri. "I don't believe it; can anything good come out of Nazareth?" We don't know our own creator, and we are uncomfortable with the notion that our creator knows us. We don't like being at a disadvantage, so we rationalize that he doesn't really know us.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** : *Traitor to Our Origin*

And who was it that schooled Nathanael on the pedigree of the coming Messiah, enough to make him suspicious of a podunk town like Nazareth? Did he come by this knowledge through his own unbiased, expert assessment, culling all the known sources,

sifting the data, and coming to an objective conclusion? Of course not. He went by what he had been told, perhaps by what he had experienced there. And who is it that taught us to expect handwriting in the sky, great signs and wonders unmistakably linked to an all-powerful god and nothing else? Our expert cosmological opinion, based on intense, independent, objective study of all necessary data? Only our atheist friends come anywhere close to such criteria, and even they would have to admit to being swayed by a so-called expert here or there. They and we persist in a false belief, one that is completely natural, and yet completely false: We believe that we, by our own sense and intellect, are the best and final judges of our reality and any god-claim made upon it. The creatures can't very well believe in their creator if they are judging him.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Unable to Escape Divine Judgment***

The worst part is that we come to this notion through no malice or prior hatred, but rather because we have lost any true knowledge of God. Actually, it was lost long before we came along—in the garden of Eden. To borrow the judicial phrase, the knowledge we do have of God is “fruit of the poisonous tree” – out of order in God's court. It does us no good to argue (as an atheist surely would) that the god-claim described in the previous step “assumes facts not in evidence.” The claimant happens to be the judge, and he stands ready and able to execute justice upon us at the appointed time.

## **PROGNOSIS: Court-ed by the Word Made Flesh**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Divine Judge Becomes Victorious Co-Defendent***

For the time being, however, God is not willing to execute that justice upon us. You see, God decided to allow his Word to become flesh and dwell among us. The one through whom “the world

came into being... yet the world did not know him" (1:10) decided to come into that world himself. "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (1:11). But surely God knew this when he decided to become flesh. How many righteous persons have you ever seen express such solidarity with those who have so rudely rejected them? "But to all who received him, ... he gave power to become children of God" (1:12). How cosmically classic is it for such a rejected God to recruit openly in the midst of such overwhelming hostility, knowing that it was going to get him into trouble? Oh, this God-in-the-flesh seems carefree and easy in our gospel text for this Sunday, but rest assured, the plot will thicken soon. It already has for John the Baptist who came before him, who experienced much hostility while pointing to him. But in Jesus, the judge becomes the judged, and the first witness against him is Nathanael. All the more bizarre is that Jesus considers Nathanael to be a recruit. Not only does Jesus reach out in open view of his enemies, he reaches out to his enemies. Jesus absorbs Nathanael's judgment upon himself as a verdict to be respected, eventually suffering that verdict even as he makes clear that the ones who should be suffering are people like Nathanael and you and me. This is the beginning of the interlocking trials in which our fiercest critic dies for us, his enemies. Now that's cosmically glorious!

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) :** *Divine Judge Woos Traitors*

Even as this set of interlocking trials takes Jesus toward his death, he already has begun to act like he's won the right to dole out the verdicts, starting with ornery Nathanael: "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" (1:46). No less than the unabashed atheist Nathanael receives this undeserved verdict from Jesus. No one is perfectly honest in their critique, but where Jesus (or more likely his Father) is

concerned, atheists seem to come closest among all of us to this kind of honesty. Of course, Nathanael is not technically an atheist, except where Jesus' divinity is concerned. Our own purely intellectual assent to Jesus' divinity hardly makes us better. Deep down inside, we too are Nathanael—but without his boldness and audacity to actually voice the suspicion. And Jesus' verdict is for us, too. If Nathanael is bowled over, so are we. This Jesus really takes the cake, and like Nathanael, we are eager to change our tune, even if we might go overboard a bit. And yet, even that gets trumped by Jesus: "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these" (1:50). Jesus yearns to do more than simply impress us. He yearns to inhabit our world permanently, to live in and through us. Simply acknowledging him as Son of God is the least of his gifts to us. When we are so completely and utterly embraced by the one we (secretly or openly) dismiss, that is the Light shining in our darkness and lifting us up out of that darkness to Life in his name (20:31). How can you beat that?

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) :** *Defendants as Angelic Witnesses*

If you think that's stupendous, wait. It gets better still. So says Jesus to Nathanael in today's finale: "You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (1:51). Whatever corporeal characteristics angels might have, the most prominent biblical definition of an angel is: one who delivers God's message of good news to God's people. And by that definition, God's angels are those called—as Philip was by Jesus and as Nathanael was by Philip – into this Life in Jesus' name. These disciples are all of us who have been rescued from our darkness by the Light of the World (9:5) through his cross of glory and his glorious resurrection. And now the spotlight shines on us; in a way, we are the angels of God

ascending and descending upon the Son of Man, pointing to him and testifying to his brilliant light that no darkness can overcome. We are Philip, calling to our fellow skeptics, inviting them to “come and see” (1:46). Frankly, they should all be so lucky to actually be in Nathanael’s shoes when Jesus the living breathing human being actually walked this earth as a mere mortal. It may seem like they have to settle for cheap substitutes in us, but what they will see are angels who, like the Son of Man we follow, embrace the trials inflicted on us by the world. Rather than getting defensive about the charges hurled at us, we engage our critics openly, recruiting them to get to know this God of ours by getting to know us, warts and all. The Light of the World shines through his sheep who know his voice (10:4); our purpose is not an American quest to spread democracy to the entire world, as some might think. Instead, our message stands in stark contrast to that other message, which may actually sound refreshing to Jesus’ harshest critics in today’s world, and win a few listeners.