

Fully Known

Scriptures: Psalm 139: 1-18
John 1: 43-51

What a week we're living through! It's been a week of bone-chilling temperatures here in Minnesota, with the mercury dropping to the lowest it's been in 5 years, nearly matching the drop in the stock market we've been going through recently, a week you might say when in the dead of winter we've nearly touched bottom. Yet it's also been a week in which we've thrilled to the marvel of a major tragedy being averted in New York, when a plane crash-landed safely on the Hudson River, and it's a week in which we're anticipating an historic occasion, the fulfillment of Martin Luther King's dream that we'd finally entered a day when a person of color could become President because we now judge people by the "content of their character" and not by "the color of their skin." 1

Yes, this is indeed a week to marvel at in America, when perhaps we've bottomed out and are starting back up! It marks a transition in our country to a new and more hopeful era, even as we find ourselves in the midst of chilling and difficult times. What better week could we have, then, for the lectionary Scripture lessons to focus on the cosmic reality of an all-knowing, all-loving, omnipresent God who gives us hope that, even with all our flaws and imperfections, we're valued and we're wanted, that we're called, in fact, to become faithful disciples of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Our texts for today are familiar to many of us: Psalm 139, with its wonderful poetic imagery about taking the "wings of the morning and dwelling in the uttermost parts of the sea," and the intimate, personal relationship it alludes to between the author and God, and then John 1: 43-51, the call of some of the first disciples from Galilee. We could easily focus on the major themes of call and response running right down the middle of these passages. Yet what I want to do today is to have you focus on a couple of the minor themes in the texts, some of those little details that usually get by-passed or glossed over in our rush to focus on the major themes. As our Psalm says, God is everywhere and in everything, and so even in the overlooked details, in the footnotes of Scripture, I think there's a lot for us to consider.

So I want you now to think about where you grew up, whether it was here in St. Paul, or somewhere else. I want you to remember how you felt about your hometown. Probably you went through a period – most likely a phase during your adolescence - when you thought your own hometown was just about the best place on Earth, and that no other town could rival it, particularly that place across the river called Minneapolis, or in my case growing up in Philadelphia, Camden, New Jersey. And if you happened to be a New Yorker, the whole state of New Jersey, or for that matter the whole rest of the USA west of the Hudson River served as your butt of derision! We made ourselves feel important and superior by putting down our less fortunate neighbors who weren't blessed so abundantly by God as our hometown seemed to us to have been! Remember the feeling? Some of us still feel that way today, though we might not admit to it in public!

Next, I want you to bring to mind someone, either from your own experience or from out of the depths of your fertile imagination, whom you would find to be the most obnoxious, irritating person you can dream of. Go ahead, take a few moments to visualize this character!

All this, of course, is in preparation to discuss Nathanael from our New Testament lesson. What an obnoxious jerk he was! Philip, all eager and full of enthusiasm, comes to tell him about Jesus, and Nathanael responds snidely: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Ugh! How judgmental, how snooty, how sophomoric! Why would Philip even waste his time trying to recruit such a brat? In fact, the three Synoptic gospel writers, Matthew, Mark and Luke, don’t even mention Nathanael as becoming one of the disciples. It’s only John who counts him in as one of the twelve. The others round out their lists of 12 with Bartholomew, not Nathanael.

Whatever the case, we can just picture Nathanael ... big head, curly hair, nose up in the air, too smart for his own good, haughty, demeaning, and, underneath it all, very insecure. Philip, as John describes him, is so much the opposite: eager beaver, Boy Scout type, following the rules, trimmed hair and fingernails, wanting to please, emotionally mature, the kind of young person old people like.

Nathanael seems already jaded, already sarcastic, already world-weary as a young adult. Sure he’s smart, but probably nobody could stand being around him for very long. He’s so opinionated, so judgmental, so oblivious to other people’s feelings!

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” What a put down! He takes the air right out of Philip’s balloon. And what a put-down to his neighboring community, to anyone or any place that didn’t meet with his stringent standards of perfection!

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Notice Nathanael doesn’t even acknowledge that Jesus is a person. He refers to him as a thing, an object rather than a human being. (Seems to me I remember someone else doing this kind of put-down in the election debates this Fall... “*that one!*”) This is the kind of person whom many of us have learned to steer clear of in adult life. They radiate negative energy. They alienate everybody. They isolate themselves by offending anyone who, like Philip, makes an effort toward them. Who in their right mind wants to be around someone like that, or have them be part of their leadership team for that matter?

Well, Jesus, for one. When Philip finally convinces the skeptical Nathanael to come and see Jesus for himself, Jesus sees Nathanael approaching from a distance and says: “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Other translations read, “...in whom there is no *guile*,” alluding back to the wily Jacob in the book of Genesis, who tricked his father Isaac into blessing him instead of his brother Esau, and on whom then the name Israel was ultimately bestowed. But even if we don’t know any of these allusions to ancient Israelites, how can Jesus know anything about Nathanael? He’s never even met him yet. If he had, he’d know better than to bother with him.

But rather than shunning him, Jesus engages Nathanael in conversation. He sees something in him that escapes the rest of us, that escapes Nathanael even! “Where did you get to know me?” Nathanael asks Jesus, stunned that this Nazarene would engage him in dialogue and dumbfounded that he immediately had him pegged.

“I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Jesus replies. Well, now just a minute. Is he saying that he’d happened by Bethsaida and had seen Nathanael sitting there? Or does he mean something else? That he somehow had powers of clairvoyance, perceiving things that were too far away to see or things which hadn’t even happened yet? This is where the story begins to get a bit spooky!

It seems clear from the rest of the text that it’s the latter being eluded to here. In John’s Gospel there are several occasions in which Jesus uses his powers of clairvoyance to read a situation and predict its outcome, or to perceive hidden facts about someone with whom he’s interacting.

“O Lord, you have searched me and known me,” writes the psalmist centuries before this New Testament text. “You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.”

Omniscience was part of the ancient Israelites’ understanding of God. They had believed for centuries that theirs was a God who knew everything about them, who cared enough about each and every individual to know fully every detail about them down to when they were being knit together in their mothers’ wombs. And coinciding with this belief in the omniscience of God was their corresponding belief in God’s omnipresence:

“Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle in the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”

From one end of Creation to the other, the Creator’s presence permeated the Israelites’ lives. They believed there was nowhere the Spirit of God was absent from the Creation, no place, not even Sheol, the netherworld of lost souls, not even Nazareth, not even Minneapolis, or Camden, or the whole of New Jersey!

The point, of course, is that no place and no one is outside of God’s presence or power or love. Look at little Bethlehem, eternally in its bigger sister Jerusalem’s shadow. It was in tiny Bethlehem of Judea that the Christ child was born. And in Nazareth of Galilee, that hick-town so looked down on and scorned by Bethsaida its neighbor, the Savior of the World grew in “wisdom and stature and favor with God and man.” And look at Nathanael, that obnoxious little “know it all.” Jesus saw in him some qualities he could affirm, some traits he valued. Nathanael was a straight shooter, and Jesus liked

that! He needed some straight shooters around, like Nathanael and Peter, to keep his disciples from all being a bunch of little “yes men”! There’s a role and a place for straight shooters, even if they don’t make themselves very popular with the rest of the gang.

But what do we make of Jesus’ clairvoyance, his ability to see and to foresee and to know all? Does this convince us that he had divine, messianic powers? Nathanael thought so, for he quickly changed his opinion of who Jesus was when he encountered this quality about him. But should we take this as anything but a footnote to the significance of our text this morning?

There’s much about the human mind we don’t yet fully understand. Clairvoyance is a capability few people have, but which has been well documented over the centuries. From the Biblical record of Jesus’ unusual capabilities to know the details of people’s personal lives, such as the story of Nathanael and the story of the woman at the well in the Gospel of John, down to modern research on ESP and telepathy, there is evidence that some people have developed this capability which goes unused in the rest of us. My own great grandmother had telepathic powers, and there are several family stories of how she could communicate with her brother and her own children just by thinking a thought or how she could see in her mind what was actually happening to them far away at that very moment. You may well have family stories of your own, or know people who have these abilities. I think we should view them as a gift from God, to be used, as our other gifts, for good and not for ill.

The belief in an omniscient, omnipresent God, however, is something far greater than just a footnote. Psalm 139 depicts a universe where God knows everything and is everywhere. At one level, we might think of this as being rather spooky, or invasive, even, like “Big Brother,” watching us and controlling us all the time. On the contrary, however, the Biblical concept does not lead to that kind of nightmarish reality, but makes the point, as Walter Brueggemann says, that “God is so intimately involved with creation that God engages it at its deepest levels,” and knows it fully. “The involvement is not just with creation in general, but with the human being, that part of creation with which God has a special relationship. And not just with any human being, but with me!”² writes Brueggemann. “The marvel is that this God seeks us, or, more pointedly, this God seeks me! And in the act of God’s seeking me and finding me, I discover my own identity as God’s beloved creature.”³

Knowing us fully, God our Creator loves us fully. With all our warts and flaws, with all our quirks and shortcomings of character, even when we may have hit rock bottom we are the ones Christ chooses to be his disciples. He knows the score, and he knows what’s still possible. Surprisingly, we’re the ones he wants to work with and die for. And it’s to us, that salvation and new life are offered.

The story of Nathanael assures us that the all-knowing, all-loving, all-powerful God has a role for us, a purpose for us, a plan for us, even when we can’t see it or know it fully ourselves. And I believe the same is true for our country, the United States of

America this week, that God has a purpose for us as a people, which is only just beginning to unfold. We can be so much better than we've been; we've got the potential within us to be a light to the nations, a blessing to the world, a place where God brings together all the diverse races and classes of people and binds them together in one community of liberty and justice for all.

Yes, this is an exciting week to be an American and to be a Christian, to be followers of the Almighty called together by Jesus Christ our Lord. Thanks be to God!

Amen.

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1. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream" speech, Washington, D.C. – 1963
 2. Walter Brueggemann, Texts for Preaching, Westminster Press, Louisville, KY, c. 1993, p.108
 3. Ibid. p. 109