

Under the Fig Tree

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Nathanael under the fig tree" by John DelHousaye

Prayer of Illumination

Ever present God, you called us to be in relationship with one another and promised to dwell wherever two or three are gathered. In our community, we are many different people; we come from many different places, have many different cultures. Open our hearts that we may be bold in finding the riches of inclusion and the treasures of diversity among us. We ask you also to illumine your Word to us so that we may walk in faith and love together. Amen.

Background

Last week we looked at the response of the Magi to Jesus: paying homage to the Christ child—kneeling in reverence and giving gifts. Here we see another crucial way of responding to Jesus: getting up off our knees and following Jesus.

Christian leadership can best be described as followership. Listening to and following Christ. And also inviting others to follow Jesus with us, to come and see.

Our gospel reading explores Jesus' call of the disciples Philip and Nathanael in the beginning of his ministry. Philip was from Bethsaida, a fishing village along the Sea of Galilee. It was in an area where Greek was regularly spoken, so there was a mixture of Jews and gentiles living there.

And then there's Nathanael from Cana, a small town like Nazareth. Sometimes there was rivalry between the small villages—which may explain Nathanael's dubious response to Jesus being from the neighboring small town of Nazareth.

But the call of Christ doesn't stop with Philip and Nathanael. We're a part of the ongoing call and response to Jesus today. Faith in Christ is an active verb. It's not static or stationary—it's a movement. And it's not just a solitary "me and Jesus" relationship. We're called to invite others with us on the journey to Jesus.

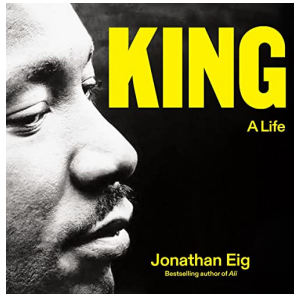
Faith is going and following where Jesus beckons—often into the unknown.

Scripture: John 1:43-51 (NRSVue)

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,^[a] you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – “Under the Fig Tree”



As we celebrate MLK weekend and February is Black History Month, I'd like to commend to you a great new biography that I'm in the midst of reading: "King" by Jonathan Eig. He really makes MLK come alive in an inspiring and honest way.

Martin Luther King Jr. shared a personal story in his sermon, "*Three Dimensions of a Complete Life*." He bravely declared we have a God who speaks today—even to kings and governors who were against his people—and this God says, "*be still and know I'm God*." But there was a point during the Montgomery Bus Boycott that MLK found himself losing touch with that voice—he was weak within, losing courage, and afraid the massive effort was going to be a failure.

One night he gave a talk—and felt like he lost the crowd. His normally eloquent voice and passionate words were falling flat. Afterwards a woman, affectionately known as Sister Paula, who was about 72 years old, came up to him. She was a bit of a legend during the boycott. Sister Paula walked to work each day instead of taking the bus. Concerned friends who always saw her walking asked if she was OK, and she'd answer, "My feets is tired, but my soul is rested."

So Sister Paula came up to Martin after the message and said—

You didn't talk well. Are you OK?

Martin said, "I'm ok Sister Paula."

She said again, "you can't fool me."

"Really, I'm fine."

A third time she said, "Come close to me, I want you to hear me."

"Even if *we ain't with you Martin*, God is with you. The Lord is going to take care of you."

Martin shared that when he got discouraged over the years, he still heard her voice even after she died. God speaking through 72-year-old Sister Paula, "*God is going to take care of you Martin—he's not going to leave you*."

In the verses before our passage, John the Baptist pointed two of his own disciples to Jesus. Jesus invited them to follow him, saying "come and see" where I'm staying and what I'm doing. One of those disciples was Andrew. And so Andrew then invited his brother Simon (*who would later be renamed "Peter" by Jesus*) to follow Jesus.

Here Jesus found Philip. We talk about finding Jesus, but first Jesus finds us. Jesus found Philip and then we read that Philip found his friend Nathanael. Christ gives us an invitation to not only follow him, but to join in on his work of finding others and inviting them to come and see Jesus for themselves. The good news is something that we just can't keep to ourselves. Good news is designed to be shared, to be passed on.

So Philip shares these great words, "We have found him about whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus the son of Joseph from Nazareth."



Nathanael is a little dubious, *"can anything good come from Nazareth?"* Philip doesn't try to argue his friend into the faith. *"Come and see."* In other words, suspend your judgements. Be open. Imagine. Check it out. Try it on. Come and see for yourself.

And Nathanael got up and went with his friend to Jesus. As he approached him, Jesus declared,

"Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"

Jesus not only calls us, he sees us. He sees our heart. He sees the best in us. It reminds me of our Call to Worship this morning from Psalm 139. God knows us intimately, before we even know he exists. In fact, God not only created us, but he knows us better than we know ourselves.

Well, Nathanael is floored, "Where did you know me?" We haven't even officially met yet. "Nathanael, I saw you under the fig tree, before Philip talked to you." "Under the fig tree." Fig trees were symbolic for the Jewish people, representing God's peace. They were also places of shade, places to reflect. Was Nathanael praying under the fig tree? Was he asking God for direction? Looking to God for peace for himself or his people? Was he avoiding something? Whatever it was, Jesus knew Nathanael's heart. He was profoundly impacted finding the Jesus who already found him.

"Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel."

"Do you believe because I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And Jesus then 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."

What is Jesus talking about here? Jesus is Jacob's ladder personified. Do you remember in our study of Genesis of Jacob's dream of the ladder from heaven? With the angels descending to earth and ascending to heaven on it? When we come into the presence of Christ, heaven is opened to us. A whole new world is opened to us. Jesus is the gateway to the Godlife in the here and now. In Christ, heaven and earth kiss.

Immanuel, God has so many GREAT things in store for us. But to get there, we've got to leave the peace and quiet and comfort of our lives under the fig tree. The call of Christ beckons us to BRANCH OUT in faith from under the fig tree. To move out of the shade and shadows into the Epiphany light of Christ. Getting out from our fig trees and following Jesus we will see GREATER THINGS than we could have ever asked or imagined.

It can be scary leaving the comforts and familiarity of the fig tree. Comfort has a way of making us soft, complacent. The lack of faith can in many ways be described as a "comfort crisis." Stepping out in faith is often uncomfortable. We've got to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. That's where the growth is, that's where the life is.



Ethicist John Kavanaugh was looking for direction and a sense of calling in his life. He was so committed to this that he travelled all the way to Calcutta to get insight from Mother Theresa.

"What do you need from me?" asked Mother Theresa.

"Could you pray for clarity for me?"

Rather bluntly Mother Theresa denied Kavanaugh's request. "But Mother Theresa you've always seemed to have the clarity that I'm searching for in my life." She laughed and said, "I've never had clarity; but what I always have is trust... So I will pray that you trust God."

What God is looking for is trust, stepping out in faith. Stepping out in faith isn't stepping out in certainty or familiarity or comfort. I've got a pastor friend who was recently facing some tough and big decisions as to what Christ was calling him to do. Using a little more earthy language, he basically shared that he had "discerned the heck out of the decision." Even though he prayed, reflected, and sought counsel, it was still hard and scary and uncertain. Yet he stepped out in faith because he sensed God calling. The peace didn't come WHILE he was still under his fig tree. It was only in the stepping out, only in the following, that a sense of peace came...**AFTER** he moved out in faith. The author of Hebrews memorably reminds us of this truth, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things NOT seen." (Hebrews 11:1).

So when faced with decisions, it's best to ask God for trust, for faith that moves mountains, rather than clarity or certainty. I believe with all my heart our God speaks today. I like how Rabbi Abraham Heschl put it, "*The invisible God is audible.*" Immanuel, let's be people of prayer, not only talking prayer, but listening prayer. Ever listening to our invisible and audible God. Let's be all ears with God. Hearing God's voice takes attentiveness to God's Word that speaks, not only the Scriptures, but to Christ the Word made flesh, the Voice of God. Now God can speak to us directly, but often it's through human voices in our lives. The Philips, the Sister Paulas, the Mother Therasas of our lives. Trusted voices can help us find God's voice. They help broaden our vision and sharpen our hearing. They help us see that, YES! Something and someone good can come from Nazareth. Faith isn't just about ears. Faith involves our feet. God's voice invites us to *follow Jesus*. God's voice is an invitation to active discipleship—to die to ourselves and follow and live for Christ.

I do have a word of warning. Listening to God's word is risky business—it won't always tickle our ears. It often messes with the status quo, the familiar. So let's not be uncomfortable alone. Let's be uncomfortable together as we follow Christ's beckoning. Christ is best formed in us as we leave our fig trees and follow Christ together.

Amen.

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition Bible, copyright © 2021 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.