

“Where Shall I Go Next?”
John 1:43-51
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Our text in John 1 finds Jesus near Jericho east and a little north of Jerusalem near the Jordan River where John the Baptist was proclaiming the coming of the messiah. John has been saying some nice things about Jesus like, “there goes the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,” and “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” John baptizes Jesus there in the waters of the Jordan and is convinced this is God’s own Son.

A couple of days later Jesus has a decision to make. Where should he go next? He can’t hang out with John forever. In the other gospels right after his baptism Jesus is “driven by the Spirit” up into the wilderness for a time of reflection and testing. There is no sense of that here. Jesus is deciding where to go next.

“Where to go from here,” you can hear him asking himself as well as those around him. “Where should I go from here?” Have you ever been in that dilemma? You have a big life decision to make or it seems big to you. Do I stay in Athens after graduation, a place I feel super comfortable or do I try Atlanta or New York or New Orleans? Or, maybe you have just been offered a big promotion but it means moving everyone to London or San Francisco, do you go?

I remember sitting in a church parking lot waiting for a phone call that would decide if I went to Louisville for seminary or stayed in Kansas for a year of internship? Lots riding on a phone call—where do you go, what do you do? My phone call came and helped me with that decision and I have yet to make it to Louisville for anything.

Jesus decides to go to Galilee. Decides to head north and start his ministry on familiar ground. Galilee his home region and where the people were a little more open to new ideas. Galilee included his home town of Nazareth and the new town that would be home for him Capernaum.

But Jesus is not going to Galilee by himself. He is going to take Philip with him. He says to Philip, “Follow me.” Now Philip is from Bethsaida where Andrew and Peter were from. Maybe he already knew Jesus, “Follow me.” Would you? Would you drop whatever you were doing and follow someone. They were young Jesus in his late 20’s or just turned 30. Maybe Philip was younger. I remember taking my son home for Thanksgiving break from a school in Indiana and another student asked if she could ride as far as Tulsa with us. And I said, “sure come on.” And in the conversation as we were driving along she said, “I’m going to drop out of school next semester and follow the “Grateful Dead” around all spring. I about drove the car off the road and I barely knew this young woman and in fact would never see her again. Just drop out of school and follow the “Grateful Dead,” become a “Dead-head?” “Yep,” she said!

Wonder what Philip's parents thought? Did he have a promising career that he was putting on hold? Philip apparently was taken by Jesus. He doesn't even pause, as far as we know, he immediately goes and finds his friend Nathaniel (also called Bartholomew) and says to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathaniel, we all know Nathaniel, he is the one who always gets everything right, he is the perfect teenager who never does anything wrong, he is the mature 20-something who is ahead of his crowd with the right questions and dissecting others decisions so they don't make a wrong turn. You know Nathaniel, he is the one you run to and say, "I have just heard the best idea ever or met the perfect person." And Nathaniel says, "Well have you thought of this, maybe it won't work." Here Nathaniel says, "Nazareth, are you kidding me, how can anything good come out of that little village of Nazareth? You did say Nazareth, right? Nobody of note has ever come from Nazareth."

If you grew up in a small town you know what he means. It's tough because you have limited experiences, you have few people to advocate for you, nobody to tell you what it's like out there beyond the boundaries of where you grew up. I once rode to Colorado with someone who had never been out of his home state of Kansas. He expected the topography to be dramatically different when we got to Colorado. He thought the mountains and the pine trees would start right there. He shouted, "Where are they? Where are the mountains this looks just like Kansas?" And we said, "Yes, it will look like this for another 200 miles eastern Colorado looks just like western Kansas more or less." If you have never experienced something different then you don't know what to expect do you? My younger sister has said to me numerous times, "Glenn, if I were you I would stop telling people you grew up in Eighty-Four, PA." In 1960 when I started high school there was only one person in my home church of 125 members who had a college degree and everyone else thought he was a little peculiar because of his "education." That's the way it is in small towns ... sometimes.

Philip is ready for Nathaniel's comment, "can anything good come from Nazareth." For Philip says, "Come and see." No argument, no let me tell all I know about Jesus, no how can you have an attitude like that ... no, just "come and see." What a magnetic personality Jesus must have had.

When Jesus saw Nathaniel coming toward him he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." Wow! What a nice compliment. How did Jesus know that? Can Jesus read a person's heart or what? Nathaniel was impressed. He knows a compliment when he hears one. He says, "Have we met before?" How do you know me? I don't recall making your acquaintance?

Clever Jesus just says, "Oh, I saw you sitting under the fig tree before Philip called you." That's all, just saw you over there. Not only is Nathaniel an honest man, a man in whom there is no deceit. He apparently is also a man that others are attracted to, when he walks into a room people notice, he makes a great first impression. Something maybe about the way he carries himself with self-confidence.

Jesus certainly punched the right buttons with Nathaniel. He goes from, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth," to saying, "Rabbi you are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel!"

He becomes the second person in this first chapter of John to declare who Jesus is. John the Baptist previously had called Jesus, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins...” And now Nathaniel calls him Son of God and king of Israel. It takes Peter 16 chapters in Matthew’s gospel to make a similar declaration. You wonder as you read Matthew, Mark and Luke if the disciples will ever figure out who Jesus is but not in John. John is very upfront about Jesus. It is the triumphant Jesus throughout the gospel. Jesus is in charge. “Follow me,” “Come and see” such phrases fill this gospel. We can hear Jesus say, “I could tell just by looking at you that you were a person with no deceit, a trustworthy person, a person who would know the truth if you saw it.” Nathaniel says, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God and the king of Israel.” These words that John puts on Nathaniel’s lips are the words that will be used to condemn Jesus at the end of the gospel. Why was Jesus crucified? He was charged with blasphemy (John 10:29-33) because he said he was the Son of God. The Romans charged him with treason because he did not deny that he was king of the Jews or Israel (John 18:33-37, 19:13-16).

John is previewing for his audience Jesus’ whole story from beginning to end right here in the first chapter. He is the Word of God who pre-existed with God before creation. He is the one that John the Baptist came to proclaim as a forerunner, people are just drawn to him because of his personality and truth. We might say today that Jesus had some swagger.

Nathaniel, says you are “the Son of God, you are the king of Israel,” Jesus instead of saying, “Ah shucks” or “Thank you,” says to him, “Do you believe because I said I saw you setting under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” And he said, “Very truly I tell you, you will see the heavens open and the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

What image does that bring to mind? Remember Jacob from the OT, Jacob’s ladder and the song “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder?” It is the image of Jacob as a young man on his way to his uncle Laban’s home and he stops to sleep. With no pillow he uses a rock and he dreams of this heavenly vision of angels ascending and descending. Now, why was Jacob going to his uncle Laban’s house? He was on the run from his brother Esau whom he had cheated out of his birthright. He was afraid for his life and his mother, Rebecca, protecting her younger son said, “Jacob, you have to go away or Esau will kill you.” Jacob was a scoundrel, a cheat, a liar and man on the run. When he has this vision the voice of God says to him, “You are the one I have chosen for the house of Israel. Your descendants will be great” and you know what this runaway says back to God? He says, “That’s good to hear and if everything turns out the way you say it will, then I will follow you.” He is bargaining with God, “I want to see how this turns out first before I say yes.”

Back to Nathaniel, when Jesus called him, “An Israelite in whom there is no deceit,” do you think he had Jacob in mind? Maybe what John is telling us is Jesus is calling Nathaniel the new Jacob. Jacob also was one of a very few individuals who actually saw the face of God and lived and now the new Jacob, Nathaniel, is looking into the face of Jesus. Remember Jesus will say later, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father because God and I are one.” (Jn. 14:9ff)

Where shall I go next was the question on Jesus’ mind after he was baptized? Where shall I begin this ministry and who should I take with me? Jesus was chosen by God to do something that no one else could do ... just like faithful people everywhere you feel the call of God to serve

on session or on the Mission & Outreach Commission or the Fellowship & Evangelism Commission or the ... and you fill in the words. All of us chosen by God.

But on the other hand, in John's Gospel ... Jesus chooses God. Just like faithful Christians everywhere. That's the part of the story I think we miss sometimes. How can we be like Jesus? Wasn't he God's Son, I mean how do we compete with trying to be like Jesus? Well, the good news is we can respond just like Jesus did and then the first disciples. I think that is why John writes this ... with you and me in mind. We can have experiences just like Jesus. Jesus was baptized and we baptized Tenny this morning and many of you have been baptized like Jesus. He responded to the call of God and so can you. Jesus visited the sick and so do you, he fed the hungry and so do you. We can have experiences just like our Lord.

Jesus says, "Follow me," and off they go to Galilee for a new adventure. Tommy & Sydney Jackson say, "Follow us to Honduras" and a whole group of people did and your faith grew. Kim Ness says, "Follow me to MLK day of service and a whole group of people will and your faith will grow. That's what we do ... Christians invite people to choose God and the invitation gets a response and that's good news, Gospel ... and do you know what the really good news is? God has already chosen you.

One person wrote, "Our relationship with God is a two-way street, both parties talking and listening and reaching out. As the verse from the Spiritual 'Every time I feel the Spirit': 'There ain't but one train that's on this track, It runs to heaven and runs right back.'" "Do you believe because I said I saw you under the fig tree? Follow me and you will see greater things than these."