

Second Sunday after Epiphany
January 14, 2018
St. John 1:43-51
This is Good But It Gets Even Better
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Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

Sometimes, low expectations are surpassed by lofty results. This doesn't mean that when you don't expect much, anything will do. What I'm suggesting is we don't always see the boundless potential in what is right in front of us.

This was the case with Nathanael, also known by Bartholomew, when his friend told him about Jesus.

Jesus had called Andrew and his brother, Simon Peter, to discipleship. Then, Jesus added Philip to his new band of student-followers. In his excitement, Philip shared with Nathanael the good news that Messiah had come. When Nathanael heard some of the details, he was not impressed. We might say he had pretty low expectations of Jesus of Nazareth. Especially after learning Jesus was from Nazareth.

Jesus would turn Nathanael around. Our Savior took the occasion to use his divine knowledge of all things, and promised Nathanael glorious sights. We can sum up Jesus' interaction and promise with this theme, **This is Good But It Gets Even Better**. Jesus shows his divine knowledge of all things. Jesus promised his disciple that he will see even greater things.

Epiphany is about Jesus revealing himself as the Messiah. After his baptism, Jesus gathered his disciples, some of whom had been disciples of John the Baptist. John had pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That Lamb was going to take his ministry north from the wilderness near the Jordan to the province of Galilee.

One of the men Jesus called to discipleship was Nathanael. I love this apostle because there was a little church in Milwaukee named for him where my wife played the organ and we attended my second year at the seminary.

Jesus at times used his divine attributes even in his state of humiliation. This was one of those times. The Lord could see that Nathanael was a true Israelite; Nathanael believed God's Word and was looking forward to the Savior's appearing. There was no "deceit" in Nathanael. He was not a hypocrite, something God alone can discern.

This is good. Jesus saw Nathanael for who he is even though Nathanael didn't see Jesus for who he is. Not yet, anyway. Nathanael at first had low expectations. Nazareth was a town likely about the size of Bethlehem's property with a few hundred people. It was in Galilee where there were lots of Gentiles and other foreigners. It was not Jerusalem and not Judea. "Can anything good come from there?," Nathanael asked, we might suppose incredulously.

When Nathanael learned that earlier while sitting under a fig tree and had not yet met Jesus, Jesus had seen into his heart, really known him, he asked Jesus about that. Jesus' answer revealed his divine nature as Jesus told him what he had done. Jesus' words are the Word of God in which the Holy Spirit works to create faith. "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Philip's friend now knew this is good. Here before him stood the Messiah he had had been seeking.

God surpassed Bartholomew's low expectation of anyone from Nazareth with a lofty result. Nathanael saw his Savior and believed in him. How often don't we have low expectations of God when we worry, doubt, or question him. God surpasses those with lofty result. God really

knows us, knows our hearts as he sees us sitting under our metaphorical fig trees. God sees the repentant sinful heart that has no deceit. He comes to us and tells us that he forgives us and that we are to follow him still. We cry out in relief and trust, "Jesus, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel."

Jesus told Bartholomew that if he thought this was good that he had now seen his Savior and believed, just wait. This is good but it gets even better. Jesus promised his disciples that he will see even greater things.

Let's go back in Israel's history. We read in Genesis 28 that at Bethel, Jacob had a dream. He saw the angels ascending and descending a ladder from heaven. At the top was the LORD, the God of Jacob's father Abraham and Isaac. What did it mean? "Surely the LORD is in this place. This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of heaven." [16, 17]

Jesus told Nathanael that he would see even greater things. He would see Jesus be the gate of heaven. Here before him stood the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Nathanael and the other disciples, later called to be apostles, would be with Jesus to his last day on earth.

They would see him live a holy life in which he did many greater miracles than knowing Nathanael's heart. They would see Jesus die an innocent death on the cross. They would forsake him in the weakness of their faith to have it strengthened again by the great miracle of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. The disciples would be on the Mt. of Olives when the angels descended to speak with them after Jesus ascended into heaven.

Jesus told Nathanael this is good to see your Savior and believe in him. It will get even better. Nathanael will be an eyewitness of all the works Jesus would do to redeem him and the rest of the world. Jesus is the great High Priest through whom we ascend into heaven and the angels descend to care for us and usher us into heaven. Jesus is the ladder, the means by which the angels and believers can go between the two.

As Jesus calls his first disciples, it reminds us that the Holy Spirit has called us to be Christ's disciples. We see Jesus and know he is the Son of God. He is the King of Israel, his church. This is good. But it gets even better. One day we will see the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man when they come with him when he returns. Now we see them in hope as the gate of heaven stands open before us in Christ.

Whoever believes has eternal life already. This is good. It gets even better when we leave our sinful flesh and nature behind in our resurrection to eternal life. We confess in our Creeds our belief in the life everlasting. It gets even better when we receive the full redemption of our bodies and with our souls have them enjoy the timeless bliss of the new heaven and the new earth.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world...Come and see!" Amen. <SDG>