

I Saw You

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Third Presbyterian Church
January 18, 2015 (Second Sunday after Epiphany B)
John 1:43-51

If the story from today's Gospel text and the seven verses immediately preceding it took place today, I imagine it could have played out on social media something like this:

So imagine with me...John the Baptist was over by the Jordan River, calling people to be baptized, proclaiming that the Messiah was near. He had his smartphone in his pocket when he saw Jesus walking toward him. Jesus, the Messiah he'd preached about. So he quickly grabbed his phone out of his pocket and began taking some video. And while the camera was rolling, it captured the Holy Spirit swooping down on Jesus like a dove.

John might have thought, "Hey, that's pretty cool! People would like to see this!" So he posted the video on Facebook, so that all his online friends could see it, too. It quickly became very popular, garnering many "likes."

The next day, John ran into Andrew and another of his friends, who had seen the post. And as they stood around, talking about it, Jesus himself walked by. And John said, "Look! There he is!" So Andrew and his friend decided to follow him, just like that, and remained with Jesus that whole day. And what a day it was! They clicked instantly, and began a new friendship unlike any friendship they'd ever had before. Later, Andrew hurried back home to find his brother Peter and tell him, too. And Andrew took Peter to Jesus to join their circle of friends.

Keep on imagining...that night, after they were back home, they wondered if Jesus was on Facebook. There were lots of Jesuses – it was a popular name. They kept looking, and sure enough, there he was – Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee. Andrew and Peter were selective about who they friended on Facebook, but since they were now real friends in real life, they thought it would be okay. So they clicked to "add him as a friend," and waited to see if Jesus would confirm their request.

The next day, when Jesus logged on, of course he did! Their Facebook friendship confirmed what was already true. Then I imagine that Jesus thought, "I wonder who else they're friends with. Maybe their friends would like to be friends with me, too." So he went to "Find Friends," and scrolled down the list called "People You May Know." There, among the pictures and their corresponding names, Jesus recognized Philip. It said "Andrew and Peter are mutual friends." Turns out Philip was from their hometown; they'd gone to school together. Jesus thought, "There'd be a good friend," and sent a friend request to Philip.

Even if you don't use Facebook, by now you probably are getting the hang of how this works. Philip confirmed Jesus as his friend. Another thing you can do is suggest friends of yours to other friends of yours, so that they can become friends too. Which is what Philip did with Nathanael. Nathanael messaged back: "Are you sure I should friend Jesus? The guy's from Nazareth, of all places! It's full of liars and cheats!"

Well, Philip knew that for as great as online friending can be, sometimes it's just better to meet someone in person, especially if you're a skeptic, like Nathanael. So Philip said to him, "Why don't you just come and see?"

It's reassuring to me that Nathanael views Jesus with the eyes of a skeptic. Others in Scripture come to mind - Thomas, commonly (but perhaps unfairly) known as "Doubting Thomas;" or Peter, or Nicodemus are just three more examples. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Can anything good come out of a place of dubious distinction? Philip's response is thoughtful, even engaging – "Come and see." Not coercion, not even persuasion, but invitation. Come and see, as if he doesn't find Nathanael's skepticism threatening in the least. Bring your questions, bring your hesitations, bring your doubts; just come and see.

I think it's a faithful way to be church, to allow space for questions and hesitation and even total bewilderment. For who among us doesn't have questions? Who among us isn't at least a *little* bit skeptical? Who among us doesn't wonder about and struggle with what these Scripture stories might mean, or with how God interacts with this world? Inquiring minds want to know!

It makes me think about a recent conversation with a local college professor. He was telling us about a class he's currently teaching that deals in part with social justice. The professor said that after his course got underway, he decided to scrap his syllabus, and allow the students' questions to drive the issues they were going to research together. Instead of teaching as the expert who imparts knowledge from above, the professor in essence invites his students on an adventure of discovery. Inquiry-based learning. Come and see.

Like Philip's invitation to Nathanael - "Come and see." But before Nathanael could get all the way to see Jesus, Jesus saw him first and knew just who he was. But Nathanael wondered, "Where did you come to know me?" "Ah," said Jesus, "before Philip called you, I saw you, under the fig tree." Then Nathanael recognized Jesus for who he was – Son of God, King of Israel. Then he saw, he knew what he could not see or know before. As Mark Davis has written, Jesus' knowing Nathanael changes the whole equation: "Before Nathanael sees he is seen; before he knows he is known; before he chooses he is chosen... The God made known in this Messiah is the God whose power of vision comes first."

In an excerpt from his poem, "The One Whose Heart is Searching," Andrew King paints the picture this way:

*Nathanael on the ground
under the fig tree, looking
up through its leaves at
an empty sky.*

*The leaves sift the sunlight,
its harshness is filtered,
but the shade over his soul
shows little gleam of joy.*

*His heart nearly closed
in its quest for truth,
his horizons have dimmed,
no corners of hope discerned.*

*But there is One who
remains watching and looking,
and the One who is searching for him
is the unrecognized God.*

Nathanael's story parallels the Psalm reading from today – with its masterful linguistic imagery, intense emotions, and close relationship with the divine: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me; you know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. 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...Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it...”

The psalmist said it just as the Gospel writer said it: before we know or name God, God names and knows us. Before we respond to God, God has already responded to us. I saw you under the fig tree. I saw you in your classroom, and on the soccer field. I saw you in the hospital. I saw you in your corner office, and you at the job fair. I saw you in your tent under the bridge. I saw you in recovery. I saw you all. I saw you together, I even saw you all alone.

“Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? Do you believe because of that? You will see even greater things than these – the very heavens opened, and God in relationship with humanity.”

Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins offers: “It was an unlikely beginning to Nathanael's walk with Jesus, but why not? What is more unlikely than heaven touching earth? Heaven is where love reigns. Where there is room for all God's children at the table. Where, in the words of a friend of mine, nothing's broken and no one's missing.”

From one perspective, this is a story of God's call to discipleship. Come and follow and remain with Jesus as he meets and befriends people who will be forever changed because of those encounters.

This story is also as much, maybe even more so, an invitation to epiphany – to seeing the divine that could not be seen before, and that Nathanael could not see before Jesus saw him. For the epiphany continues in the Gospel of John as it tells the story of these greater things that the disciples would see – all of the signs that would reveal something about Jesus as Word made flesh. It was only the beginning of what Nathanael and all of the other disciples would see and know and learn about in their relationship with him.

Interestingly, the Gospel of John doesn't specifically name Nathanael again until the very end, after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection and appearance to Thomas. Nathanael's out fishing at the lake with the other disciples, fellow skeptics Peter and Thomas among them. They catch nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach, but the disciples didn't know who he was. “Cast your net on the other side,” the unrecognized Jesus said, “and you will catch lots of fish.” So they did, and there were. They came to shore, and brought in their catch. There was a charcoal fire on the beach, with fish on it, and bread. And Jesus said to them, “Come, and have breakfast.” This time none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because then they knew it was the Lord. Another revelation, another epiphany.

Andrew King's poem “The One Whose Heart Is Searching” also includes this excerpt:

*You and me on our beds,
our couches, you and me by our lamps.*

*You and me under spreading trees,
or peering at the sky through windows;*

*you and me at our office desks,
fingering the plastic of keyboards;*

*you and me in our living-rooms,
or sitting at our kitchen tables;
you and me, so yearning for hope,
so longing for meaning, truth, or joy –
may we become aware of the One
who is searching for us;
awake to the One
who knows and calls our names
longing for us to listen:
the God of promise and of invitation.*

Friends, we are people who wonder and question and even bear deep uncertainty. We seek to know and understand. We want to see, to truly see. This is the invitation we have been given: Come and see through the eyes of the One who saw us first. Amen.