

### Can Anything Good Come out of Hillsboro?

A man from Marion was passing through Hillsboro, and decided to stop in at the hardware store. He saw a local standing outside with a long pole and a measuring tape. The man was standing the pole on its end and trying to reach the top of it with the tape measure. The Marionite, chuckling to himself and trying not to be excessively scornful, said “here, let me help you.” Taking the pole, he laid it on the ground, stretched out the tape measure, and said, “There. It’s 10 feet long.” The man from Hillsboro replied, “I don’t need to know how long the pole is. I need to know how tall it is.”

What do you suppose Nathanael had against the town of Nazareth? Was there some rivalry between Nazareth and Cana, where he was from (like we have between Hillsboro and Marion)? Did people from Cana believe themselves superior in some way? Or was this just Nathanael’s problem?

And what was his problem? Why was he so skeptical at first when Philip came and told him about having just met Jesus? Why was he so critical and judgmental? Was this just a reflection of his personality? A low self esteem, perhaps?

I suppose we can’t really blame him. Nathanael appears only in the Gospel of John, and only twice—here in the first chapter, and again, very briefly in the last. He apparently was not one of the “important” disciples of Jesus. Not one who went on to do great things. In my Bible dictionary the entry for Nathanael is a mere thirteen lines long.

And yet, he plays a role, doesn’t he? As I will suggest, an important role. An exemplary role, even.

Last week, Jesus called his first three disciples. Two of them, you’ll remember, had originally been disciples of John the Baptist. One of these was Andrew. And after meeting Jesus he went and found his brother Simon and said to him “We have found the Messiah.” So Simon immediately went with Andrew to meet Jesus, whereupon he received his new name, “Peter,” the Rock. (Who, by the way, garnered 128 lines in my dictionary—way more than Nathanael.)

What kind of people do you suppose Jesus was looking for to be his disciples? Smart people? Strong people? Successful people? Beautiful people? Charismatic people? Confident people?

At the beginning of today’s passage, verse 43, we read that Jesus “decided to go to Galilee.” We’re not given any reason. But something was guiding him. Some sense of purpose. Premonition, even.

Jesus, it appears, needed disciples. Loyal friends to accompany him. Learn to know him—who he is, what he is about. And then introduce him to others. One by one, group by group, until eventually the whole world knows about him. But that is yet a long ways off. Still, you have to start somewhere.

Did you notice that Nathanael was the first one who didn’t immediately drop what he was doing to join Jesus? The unnamed disciple, Andrew, his brother Simon—they didn’t seem to need any convincing. And today, on his journey to Galilee, the first person he met was Philip,

from Bethsaida, and all Jesus needed to do was say the words “Follow me,” and Philip did so, no questions asked.

Actually, what he did was he went to find Nathanael. And in his excitement he blurted out “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote...” Maybe Philip should have stopped there; wouldn’t that have been enough to arouse Nathanael’s curiosity? Or at least he could have added something like “Jesus, a direct descendant of King David, from the important city of Jerusalem.” Wasn’t that the one the prophets wrote about? Wouldn’t that have sounded more impressive? But instead, Philip simply said, “Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

Who’s Joseph? And Nazareth, seriously? Nazareth was nowhere. A small town of mostly working class people, maybe around the size of, oh, Hillsboro KS. As I said earlier, there might have been some rivalry between Nazareth and Nathanael’s home town Cana. But for whatever reason, Nathanael had a rather low opinion of Nazareth. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

We don’t know what the nature of Philip and Nathanael’s relationship was. Friends? Distant cousins? But we get the impression that they knew each other pretty well. Which is why Philip said the best thing he could have in response to Nathanael’s dubious scorn. “Come and see.”

Because some of us are like Nathanael. Some of us need to check out things for ourselves. We’re certainly not going to believe just because someone else has told us to. Are you one of those who need to figure things out for themselves? Or do you know people like that?

To Nathanael’s significant credit, he did at least go and see. He went with Philip, despite his doubt, his disinclination to believe there was or ever would be such a person as the Messiah. There must have been something about the way Philip said it. Matter of fact, with more than a hint of barely contained excitement. Something that made Nathanael curious—dubious, yes—but interested. So he went.

This is the point in the story where things get interesting. Jesus, seeing Nathanael approach, says a really bizarre thing. “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” What does that mean?! Even the commentators don’t know. One of them thinks it might have had something to do with the meaning of Nathanael’s name. Or maybe what Jesus meant was, “Here is truly an Israelite who will let no one deceive him.” Which apparently was quite true about Nathanael. Whatever Jesus meant, it brought Nathanael up short, startled him, even. “Where did you get to know me?” As far as Nathanael knew, they had never met before.

Then Jesus says another mysterious thing. “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Causing our doubting, dubious Nathanael to blurt out, almost before he could stop himself, “Rabbi! You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Why did Nathanael respond so suddenly and uncharacteristically? Was it the way Jesus said “I saw you?” Did it seem to Nathanael as if Jesus knew everything about him—things he was proud of, things he was ashamed of or embarrassed by. Remember these eyes? [Refer to icon on the communion table.] They see things!

Now, if you’ve been paying attention, you know that to this point in the Gospel of John we’ve heard a variety of interesting, mysterious, even astonishing titles for Jesus. Word. Light. A father’s only son. Lamb of God. Rabbi. Messiah. But none seem more astonishing than the two that come out of Nathanael’s own lips. Because of which, if you’ve been paying attention,

you can have no doubt that these titles must be true. And that, like Deryll said, “you ain’t seen nothing yet.”

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? How about Cana? How about Hillsboro? Oh yeah! One skeptical, doubting, astonished disciple at a time. Even if what we most care about it not how long the pole is, but how tall it is.

Your story, and mine, may not appear in any Bible dictionary. And even if they did, they may not take up very many lines. But one thing these lines might very well say. We have seen, and been seen by, these eyes. May our response be as convinced and convicted as Nathanael’s. And may these eyes [refer to icon], as they did Nathanael’s, honor our doubts and recognize our integrity.

Amen.