

“The All-Knowing Christ Bridges the Gap between Us and God”

Sermon based on John 1:43-51

Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI

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Isaiah once announced—and Jesus fulfilled it! – *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.* Amen.

It was so very many years ago: one thousand nine hundred and some seventy-nine years ago—imagine it! Springtime was just around the corner. They were at the lower reaches of the Jordan River—not unlike the Rock River in size and course and purity. Three days ago, God’s first new prophet in more than four centuries: John the Baptist—had testified to the Jewish leaders. Two days ago, John identified Jesus as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Yesterday, he directed some of his own disciples to follow Jesus.

Theme: The All-Knowing Christ Bridges the Gap between Us and God

It was then and it was there that Philip and Nathanael met Jesus. And Jesus announced to them: THE ALL-KNOWING CHRIST BRIDGES THE GAP BETWEEN US AND GOD. We’re going to savor that message today. We’re going to see what a difference it made in the lives of Philip and Nathanael. And we’re going to consider the difference it’s going to make in our own lives, as well.

Exposition: Jesus Meets Philip and Nathanael

God’s Word to us today begins this way: *The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee.* Probably he was consciously fulfilling the prophecies that made him the Prophet from Galilee. For sure he was on his way to the wedding at Cana a few days later. *Finding Philip, Jesus said to him, "Follow me."* “Be my disciple!” he said. *Philip, like Andrew and Peter,* whom Jesus had called to be his disciples the day before, *Philip was from the town of Bethsaida*—up north, on the northern shore of the Galilean Lake, near Capernaum, which was the central city of Jesus’ ministry.

Now *Philip found Nathanael* – he was also from up north, from Cana, west of Philip’s Bethsaida, in the hills, and only ten miles north of Jesus’ Nazareth. Now *Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law"* – the fulfillment of the genealogical promises, the fulfillment of the ceremonial provisions of the law code – *“and about whom the prophets also wrote”* – the fulfillment of their detailed prophecies. He is *“Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”* And that was the usual, official way of stating a name: *Jesus*, the first name, it means “Savior”; *son of Joseph*, the last name; and *from Nazareth*, his hometown.

And here’s how Nathanael reacts: *"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked.* Nathanael knew something about Nazareth. It was only ten miles from where he grew up. But what he knew especially was that the Savior wasn’t supposed to come from there. He also knew the Savior wouldn’t be the son of any human father. Nathanael’s study of the Scriptures is what made him understandably suspicious.

To which Philip simply replied: *"Come and see."*

Now, here’s where it gets interesting: *When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching* – before they could even talk – *Jesus said of Nathanael, "Here is a true Israelite* – a

genuine believer, Jesus was looking straight into his soul – *in whom there is nothing false* – Jesus knew Nathanael was an upright guy, he was looking right into his heart.

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked—now a lot less suspicious, now a lot more surprised and stricken with awe.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you"—better, you were there *when* Philip called. Now, a good *fig tree* was a tree as much as thirty feet tall, with lots of big shady leaves, and it was a favorite place for God's Word and prayer. Nathanael must have been spending time in God's Word and prayer—leading Jesus, who was God, to know his heart and soul.

Well, Nathanael was convinced! *Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi"* – *Teacher*, the top term for a professional Bible man – *"you are the Son of God"* – not the son of Joseph, but "God the Son," he confessed – *"you are the King of Israel"* – and Nathanael might even have been thinking, "You must have ties to Bethlehem and to David!"

Well, Jesus affirms Nathanael's faith. *Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree."* But Jesus promises a better basis for a firmer faith. *"You shall see greater things than that"*—saving things! *He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending"*—just like Jacob dreamed, remember the Old Testament reading? In fact, maybe that's the account Nathanael was pondering under that fig tree. And the stairway in that story, the stairway to heaven, would be *"the Son of Man"*—Jesus' favorite designation for himself: emphasizing he was both God and man, both human and divine.

And that's it. That's the account of Jesus' encounter with Philip and especially Nathanael. So, what does it mean? What application does this account have for us? – Well, let me apply this, first of all, to our hearts—and afterwards, to our lives.

Appropriation: The All-Knowing Christ Bridges the Gap between Us & God

What does this account mean to our hearts? I think the most striking thing in that regard is how the searching eye of God sees all the desires in our hearts—just like God looked into Nathanael's soul.

God sees all the motives of our hearts! That's a scary thought, isn't it?! I mean: we may claim to put God first, but God sees our lust for our pleasure and our greed for more things. We may claim rightly to use God's name, but God hears it when we misuse his name, even only in our hearts. We may claim always to love and to honor the Bible, but God sees our laziness – our idolatry of other things – when we fail to read and to hear his Word. We may claim to obey our authorities, but God hears us mutter. We may claim always to be hard working, but God sees us when our supervisors don't. We may turn off the television when somebody else comes into the room and newest Victoria's Secret commercial comes on, but God knows. We may shut up when the person about whom we're gossiping comes into the room, but God—he knows we've been gossiping.

God sees all the motives of our hearts! He sees the rot in our souls by nature. He saw the decay in our hearts already when we were cute little babies fresh from the wombs of our mothers. And as God, he separates himself from us—as high as heaven is above the earth. And he says, "I am Holy God! I can have nothing to do with your guilt!"

And yet—and yet he did, didn't he?

I mean: isn't that what Christmas is all about? Here comes Jesus – Holy God himself! – toothless, maybe even hairless, without clothes, into this dark and sinful world. Why? Jesus must love us an awful lot! He must want to get rid of our guilt!

Isn't that what Epiphany is all about? Here comes Jesus – God himself! – and he calls to us, "Follow me!" "Follow me—and hear how much I love you. Follow me—and

see my power to save. Follow me—and feel the warm embrace of my Word when you're most afraid.”

Isn't that what Jacob's dream was about? Here we are—sinners on the run. There God is—very, very remote, in all his holiness. And Jesus lays himself between us. Jesus bridges that impossible gap between us and God. Jesus is our stairway to heaven! Through him to God go all the angels with all our prayers in time of need. Through him from God come all the angels with all his help for us. On the basis of Jesus we step up and approach God. On the basis of Jesus – and Jesus alone! – we climb up to dwell with God forever.

That's what the Spirit is saying to our souls this morning: The All-Knowing Christ Bridges the Gap between Us and God.

Applications: We Need to Follow the Examples of Nathanael and Philip

And that means there's a message here for our lives, as well. Like Philip and Nathanael, we are drawn to follow Jesus in everything we do. As we follow Jesus, God gives us their lives as examples to follow.

Let's take Nathanael first. Isn't he an amazing guy, really? Jesus – God! – is able to look Nathanael in the eye and say, “Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.” Isn't that remarkable? And how did Nathanael gain that kind of character? He studied the Scriptures! He knew the Bible well enough to know the town from which the Savior would come. He knew the Bible well enough to be awaiting the Son of God, the King of Israel.

You need to do the same! Every week we share things in the sermon about our Savior that you wouldn't otherwise know. So, you need to be here. Every week we share in Bible Class things about our God that you wouldn't otherwise realize. You need to consider being there. And it's not too late. Every day the Spirit teaches you things from the Scriptures you wouldn't otherwise remember. You need to read those Scriptures. And it's not too late to start today—or tomorrow. And you'll get to be like Nathanael—a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.

And then, there's Philip. He's amazing, too, isn't he? With no hesitation, Philip is the one who ran to Nathanael and declared, “We've found him!” When Nathanael balks, at first, Philip is the one who insists – not fancily, but effectively – “Come and see Jesus!” Without Philip, Nathanael doesn't get to know Jesus and climb Jesus as his stairway to heaven.

And you need to serve others like Philip did! Does your spouse, do your parents, do your children fail to read the Bible? You need to read the Bible with them! Does your brother, does your sister, do your children fail to get to church? You need to pick them up and bring them! Does your co-worker, does your neighbor, does your friend not know Jesus? You need to tell them! You need to tell them, “Our bodies have a problem; they're going to die. That's because our souls have a problem; they're full of sin. So, we need help! And it's Jesus who gives us help! Jesus died in penalty for our sins. Jesus had the power to rise from the dead, and he has the love to raise us from the dead. He promised, ‘Because I live, you also will live.’ And you need to believe that and learn more!”

Conclusion: A Special Opportunity to Invite Others Back to Christ

So, the all-knowing Christ bridges the gap between us and God. We need to study him carefully, as did Nathanael. We need to invite others to him zealously, as did Philip.

And I want to conclude by saying, “You have a special opportunity to do that inviting here at Saint Mark’s. In fact, your church’s biggest need is for you to do exactly that kind of inviting! Here’s what I mean....

Saint Mark’s counts two thousand six hundred some communicant members—praise God! – basically high school age and above. Of that two thousand six hundred, maybe six hundred or a few more hear God’s Word in church most of the time. I’m looking many of you in the eye right now!—and I cannot begin to express how much we appreciate you! But a thousand of those souls – a thousand! – rarely enjoy the pleasure of hearing of their Savior here at church. And I’m not sure the rest of us have done all we can to encourage them.

We need your help to do that encouraging! There’s going to be a meeting here – right here in church – at seven in the evening, Monday evening, January twenty-fourth. That’s a week from tomorrow night, at seven o’clock. I’ll share with you some of my ideas toward reaching our wandering brothers and straying sisters, whom we love and whom Christ loves. And you can share your ideas with me.

Let’s get together and figure out how we can better encourage folks to climb with us on the stairway of our Savior to the hallways of heaven. Brothers and sisters, nothing else really matters more than that! Amen.

Isaiah once announced—and Jesus fulfilled it! – *Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.* Now, that’s what we’re going to talk about more: at seven o’clock, Monday, January twenty-fourth, right here. Don’t forget! Amen.