

A Storytelling Commentary on John 1:43-51

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This is a Jewish story that is full of Jewish jokes and the camaraderie that is present between Jewish men. It is full of good humor and joy. It is a story of someone who discovered in one moment a relationship that became the most important friendship in his life. The probability is that Nathaniel told this story because he remembered it as the moment when his life was changed. It's like the stories that people tell about when they saw their future husband or wife for the first time. It has that spirit of joy and of the memory of a life changing moment.

This story also reflects the rivalry between the various towns of Galilee. Phillip finds Nathaniel and tells him "We've found the one about whom Moses and the law and all the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." And Nathaniel says cynically, "Ha, can anything good come out of Nazareth?" His tone comes from the competitions that were held between the guys in Nazareth and the guys in Bethsaida and in Capernaum and all the various towns around. This is the kind of verbal jousting that is characteristic of small-town competitions in all ages. I know about that because I grew up in one, Clayton, Ohio, and we had various competitions—softball, football, basketball— between the boys from Clayton, Brookville, Phillipsburg, Trotwood, and all the other little towns around Clayton. That's the spirit of this story. The towns of Galilee all competed with each other and Nathaniel responds with a put down of Nazareth. Phillip responds by implicitly agreeing but persists by saying "Come and see" and so Nathaniel goes.

Jesus' words about Nathaniel are a Jewish joke. When Nathaniel comes to him, he says "Look at this, an Israelite in whom there is no guile," that is, no trickery, conniving, or deception. Jesus' joke refers back to all the stories of Jacob in which he tricked his brother, Esau, out of the inheritance and later tricked his father-in-law out of his sheep. He was constantly involved in one plot or another in which he was deceiving somebody for his own benefit. These are the kind of jokes that the sons of Jacob told about each other. They all recognized that this was a characteristic of many members of their community. Jesus looked at Nathaniel and saw that this guy was upfront with everything.

Nathaniel responds with surprise, "How did you know me?" And Jesus' response is "Before you came over I saw you under the fig tree talking to Philip." The story clearly implies that this place was out of Jesus' sight and that Jesus had never met him. Jesus' comment was only possible if he had supernatural perception. The audience can confirm this because they have just heard the story about the conversation between Nathanael and Philip presumably under the fig tree. The story implies that Jesus is a kind of Superman who could see and know things that were outside the range of his sight and knowledge.

And Nathaniel responds in that way, "You're the son of God! You're the King of Israel!" His cynicism is transformed into total, over the top affirmation. It is among other things

hilarious and Jesus laughs when he sees this transformation of Nathaniel and says to him, "Have you believed because I told you I saw you standing under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these. You will see the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Jesus ends the encounter with a promise that Nathaniel will see the Spirit of God actively present in the world in this symbol of the angels of God ascending and descending on Jesus. Jesus' image recalls Jacob's vision of a ladder reaching to heaven with angels ascending and descending upon it (Gen. 28.12) and the unambiguously positive dimensions of their ancestor Jacob's character. It also implies that Jesus is both a biological and a spiritual descendant of Jacob.

This story is so personal and spontaneous that it must have been a story that Nathanael told about his first meeting with Jesus. In this way it is like the preceding story of Andrew and his nameless fellow disciple who remembered their first meeting with Jesus at four o'clock in the afternoon. Both are distinctive, highly personal stories about the day that was the turning point in these young men's lives. This is a wonderful story and it needs to be told with vim, vigor and the joy of a new friendship. It might be appropriate to use a Jewish accent since it is a Jewish joke. But that depends on the sensibilities of your congregation. Once again, a detached and objective tone inevitably destroys the spirit of the story. It is like telling a good joke with no sense of humor. It is structured to evoke smiles from the audience and to end with a sense of wonder.