

John 1:43-51 Nathanael

Let's talk about names. An interesting feature in the biblical stories is the meaning of the names, for instance, Samuel and Jonathan, which happen to be the names of my younger two sons. Another example is two of the prominent divine names in the Old Testament, Yahweh, and Elohim. Bare with me.

The name "Samuel" means, "asked of God," or, "God has heard." The story is about Hannah, Samuel's mother, who had been unable to have children, like other women in the Bible, Sarah and Elizabeth come to mind.

She prayed and asked for a son and promised to dedicate him to the Lord's service if God answered her prayer. When the child was born she named him Samuel, because she asked and God heard and answered her prayer.

The Hebrew word for "gift" is "Nathan." The two names "Jonathan" and "Nathanael" mean the same thing, that "God has given," one making use of the divine name "Yahweh," "Jonathan." The other making use of the divine name, "Elohim," or "El," as in, "Nathanael."

I am sure that I did not plan on having sons with these names, it just happened that when they were born those names were chosen, but the meanings are still important to me, "asked of God and God has heard,"

and, "gift of God." All of our children are precious gifts from God.

Samuel

Another interesting feature of the bible is the "call" stories of Samuel and Nathanael, one from the Old Testament book of I Samuel, and the other, read here today, from the Gospel of John.

As a young boy, Samuel was sent by his mother, in honor of her pledge, to serve in the temple under the priest Eli. One night he heard a voice calling his name, "Samuel." He went to see what Eli wanted but Eli had not called for him.

After a couple of times, Eli realized that God was calling Samuel and instructed him that next time he heard the voice, to answer with these words, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." And he did. Samuel would go on to become the last and greatest judge, who anointed both Saul and David as king over Israel.

Nathanael

Here in John, the story is a little different. It happened when Philip came to Nathanael and claimed to have found the Messiah, or as he put it, "the one Moses wrote about in the Law." It was Jesus of Nazareth. And Nathanael revealed that even in ancient Israel there were town rivalries. "Can anything good come from

Nazareth?” Nathanael, you see, was from Cana, not very far away. As a matter of fact, if the archeologists are right. they were only about 8 miles apart.

That makes me think of Staunton and Gillespie, the two towns in Illinois where my sons grew up. There was a fierce and sometimes ugly rivalry between the towns, separated by eight miles of corn. Otherwise rational and sane people could become beasts at each other’s throats over a little league baseball game. Nathanael’s comment reveals that such things are not anomalies in history.

He was, nonetheless, willing to check things out and in the course of his encounter with Jesus, a miracle happened. Jesus greeted him with these enigmatic words, “*here* is a true Israelite, in whom there is no guile.”

Jesus meant that Nathanael was sincere, that he had no ulterior motives. By calling him a true *Israelite*, he raises the person of Jacob himself, the first person to go by that name; Jacob, the brother of Esau, the son of Isaac, who was full of guile.

The emphasis is on the importance of authenticity in faith. Like love, faith is in the end not worth anything if it is motivated by the expectation of a reward or coerced by the fear of punishment.

This statement reveals that Jesus was able to judge character and when Nathanael heard it he felt as if he had been seen through. “How do you know me?” he asked Jesus, figuring that they must have met previously, and he just failed to remember it. All Jesus said in reply was that he had seen Nathanael when he was still under the fig tree, which hardly explains how Jesus was able to assess his character.

Nathanael seemed to over-react. “You are the Son of God, the King of Israel.” Jesus said, “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.

## Calling

The Providence of God is one of the primary doctrines of the Christian faith. It tells us that we are “seen through,” like Nathanael, that we are known. It tells us that God has *made* us, and *with* a purpose. Like in the psalm from which we recited this morning, it tells us that God has mapped out our lives for us and prepared us specifically, each one for their particular journey.

The Doctrine of God’s Providence teaches us to believe that we are known and that there is such a purpose even when we do not understand it and everything seems to be in disarray all around.

Sometimes the evidence of our lives defies the truthfulness of the doctrine and the best that we can say is that if it is true, then we don’t see it, we don’t

understand. The doctrine itself is meant to guide and encourage us through these times.

From time-to-time, however, it is given to each of us to catch a glimpse, through an encounter of our own with Christ, just how we are seen and known; and just how our lives have been prepared for us, and for our good, and for the world's good. Once we have had this experience, our faith is deepened.

I can't help but be reminded of Proverbs 3:5-6, which is not one of the readings for today, but it could be,

“Trust the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge God, and God will direct your path.”

### Things We Ask For

In the end it doesn't matter much what it is that we think we want out of life. All of life is a theological question, that is, it is a question we ask of God. Even those who say they believe there is no God are up to their necks in the question of God.

Sometimes we express this question in terms of our personal lives; what we desire privately. Other times we see in terms of the groups we are a part of; the country we live in or the church in which we serve. The psalms and prophets and epistles of the Bible honor these expressions.

But when we make too much of them we are involved in useless idolatries because we treat as ultimate that which is not ultimate.

We are asking for our lives! The biblical proclamation is that God has heard our asking, and that God has given our lives to us. The conclusion we must draw is that in spite of whatever evidence *is* to the contrary, God's gift is good, good beyond measure, the best of all things. Thus the joy of it all, the exuberance of the gospel. We name our children after it.

The great paradox of the gospel is that because we are so fully known and so wonderfully made it seems like we have no say in it, that we are not free, have no control over it. And yet we are completely free. Our lives have been completely determined for us and given to us and yet we are never more at home than when we freely give ourselves to God, like Nathanael, when he said to Jesus,

“You are the Son of God, “ and he meant it, after all, there was in him, no guile. Finally, there is one more thing to say to make this little proclamation complete, to those who have seen glimpses enough to believe,

“You ain't seen nothin' yet.

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