

Sermon: “Fearfully and Wonderfully Made”

(Preach by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, Ottawa, January 17, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

What is so special about a fig tree? I ask this question because it is central to the call story of Nathanael, as recorded in the Gospel of John 1:43-51. The story begins with Jesus calling on Philip to follow him. Philip was from the city of Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Simon Peter, on the north-eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus, at that time, was beginning to gather around him a small group of disciples. When Philip received the invitation to follow, he went to his friend Nathanael and explained, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote...”, raising the Messianic expectation of the long awaited, the one who is to come. However the dramatic reveal that follows is somewhat of a letdown... Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth. It is a technically accurate yet curious description of Jesus — son of a little known carpenter from a little known town. Moses and the prophets certainly did not write about that, for they had written about a descendant of David, born in the town of Bethlehem. Wouldn't that be a much better description of Jesus? So we should not be surprised of Nathanael's immediate reaction, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” To this retort, Philip calmly and wisely replied, “Come and see.”

Oftentimes we are way too eager to explain faith to non-believers, to rationalize, to clarify and to justify. Sometimes, what is truly needed is a simple invitation, ‘come and see’. See what Christ Jesus is doing in our lives, transforming us step-by-step through the Spirit of God, enabling us to be or to do far more than we ever imagine could be possible. Come and see, I can't put a finger on it, I can't explain it fully, but if you truly encounter the Triune God, your life will also be most fearfully and wonderfully changed. Com and see for yourself.

Despite his objection, Nathanael followed Philip to Jesus. When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Completely baffled by such an unearned praise, some would even call it flattery, Nathanael demanded, “Where did you get to know me?” Where or how indeed? Notice he did not reject the praise from Jesus, only wishing to know where or how he is known by Jesus.

'To know' is a common verb yet complex in its application, particularly with regard to 'knowing another person'. In my younger years I once had a friend. I would categorize him as a drinking buddy because I simply can't recall any interaction with him that did not involve consuming excessive amount of alcohol. In one of our more drunken stupor, he declared that since I was being such a good friend, that should I ever call on him, even if he has 'two knives pierced through his ribs', he would still be at my service. The expression 'two knives through the ribs' is a common Chinese euphemism which conveys the sentiment that 'nothing is too difficulty'. I don't recall my actual reply to him, but do remember thinking, 'Don't be so quick buddy, I hardly know you'. I don't think I ever called on him. We lost touch fairly quickly afterward.

It really is hard to truly know someone. Part of growing up and integrating into a functional society involves constructing and managing multiple masks we all have, to some degree more or less. Out of fear, shame, or simply bad experiences in the past, we all withhold certain aspects of ourselves from others. No one is truly and fully open, at all time, in all circumstances. As I experienced more in life, especially in ministry, I came to develop a personal philosophy that it takes at least two years to get to know someone, to develop cohesive co-working relationship. Even then, truly knowing a person takes a life time.

In the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, the phrase 'to know a person' is an accepted euphemism for engaging in sexual intercourse. Try practice this in your marriage... "Honey, are you in the mood to get to know one another?" Or, sweetheart, could I have a quick 'get to know you'? Knowing another person is more than knowledge, it is intimacy.

To Nathanael's question, "How do you know me?", Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" We are back to the opening question I posed earlier: What is so special about a fig tree, or being under a fig tree? What in this statement by Jesus that prompted Nathanael to completely alter his disposition, from scepticism to belief, from cynicism to faith?

Figs is a common produce in the Mediterranean, with deep colour, distinctive shape, and that sweet aroma. There is something that feels rich and decadent about figs. Figs first crop up in the Bible in Genesis 3, right from the beginning, in the garden of Eden. We saw that its leaves were used to cover up the shame of Adam and Eve. I think, it is the only type of tree specified that we know for sure was in the garden.

In Deuteronomy 8, figs is described as part of God's abundant provision. "The Lord you God is bringing you into a good land....a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranate, olive oil and honey". Try to picture in

the time leading up to a Jewish holiday, when many of these harvests were brought into Jerusalem. The richness of God's blessings to His people is celebrated, some devoted to God in sacrifices, most distributed to the people, ripe and ready to be eaten.

In the prophetic literature, fig tree became symbolic of Israel itself. Hosea 9:10 says, "Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your ancestors." Elsewhere in minor prophets, fruitless fig trees became synonymous to God's punishment against Israel for their faithlessness. It was as if fig became something of a barometer to the spiritual health of the nation.

Sitting under fig tree became symbolic of peace and security, as in Micah 4:4, that "they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken."

Later in the rabbinic literatures, 'sitting under a fig tree' took on a new meaning, it became an euphemism for studying the Torah. The rabbis were not clear as to why that came about, but I suspect studying the Law of Moses is likely more prevalent during a time of peace and security. Even so, it is still not clear as to why being seeing 'sitting under a fig tree' or 'studying the Torah', would prompt Nathanael to declare what he declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Does it have something to do with Nathanael's mindset, while he was studying, meditating and praying?

Here, passages in Lectionary reading are knitted together brilliantly. I am referring particularly to Psalm 139, where the psalmist declares in prayer, "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."

More than being known completely by the Lord God, the psalmist understands how we are all made, how even in our mothers' wombs, we are all being formed, knitted together by our Creator, in the most complex, intricate, amazing way. In awe and bewilderment, psalmist shouts out in acclamation, "I praise you [O God], for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well." As if the psalmist is giving voice to Nathanael, filling in the blank, expressing his inner thoughts that normally only God could hear.

For a number of years, I had served in the Ministry / Personnel committee of the Presbytery of Montreal. Part of the committee's responsibilities was to certify seminary students who believe they have been called by God, and to supervise them through the discernment process of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. It is a critical process where the inner call of an individual is gradually

confirmed by the wider community of faith, then eventually affirmed into ordained ministry of the church.

During initial certification, we would often start with a general question, “tell us about your spiritual journey”. Somewhere along the interview, we would follow up with this crucial question, “tell us about your call”. Depending on the answer, we may sometimes push a perspective candidate further, “how are you certain that you are called by God?”

Over the years, I’ve had the pleasure of hearing many call stories, some puzzling, some miraculous, and some down right dubious. I’ve learned to watch out for those well-crafted call stories, too certain of God’s call, too quick to believe. For the journey of faith is long, and those who are called to follow Jesus can sometimes stumble. To those who genuinely trust and believe, yet leaving room for doubt, for growth, for the Spirit to do God’s work; to those who follow Christ unwaveringly, they may yet to see greater things.

I am not sure if Nathanael is put under the certification of the PCC, he would be able to articulate a coherent call story of why he believes, or why he is willing to follow Jesus. I am even less certain if the the Ministry / Personnel committee would even certify him to begin with. Nevertheless, what we fail to see, God sees, what we do not know, God knows.

To Nathanael’s quick turnaround to seemingly firm faith, Jesus responded, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” An obvious connection to the story of Jacob’s ladder, in Genesis 28, a fulfillment of God’s covenantal promise to Israel that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. [For] I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go”.

Christ Jesus, not as the Son of God but as the Son of Man (or perhaps a better translation would be ‘the son of humanity’), will now bridge that seemingly unbridgeable gap between people and God ever since the fall of humanity, as our mediator, our saviour and our Lord. Praise be to God, for we are made, we are known, now through Christ, we are saved and reconciled to God. Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**