

An Unexpected Call
Dr. D. William McIvor
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

John 1.43-51 (NRSV)

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to 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!" Jesus answered, "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."

ONE: Where does God come from?

This text from John's Gospel looks at how first Philip and then Nathanael were called to be disciples of Jesus. So the story can be a measuring stick by which we compare our own pathway to discipleship. My title suggests that that the call to discipleship can come in unexpected or surprising ways. So I want to think about how you and I can stay alert to how Jesus might call us today. Perhaps we can best get at this by asking two additional questions. First, I want to ask, where does God come from? Then we will ask what actually brings us to faith?

The first question, then, is where does God come from? That's not a very elegant way to put it but I think it gets at the point. Philip told Nathanael that God, in the person of the Messiah, came from Nazareth. What does that mean for us? Where does God come from?

I grew up in what was then the little town of Kirkland, Washington, just outside of Seattle. And if we wanted to describe someone as a bumpkin, a hick, or someone who didn't count for much, we usually said they were from Duvall, an even smaller town a little more out in the country. Now if any of you should happen to be from Duvall, Washington, I apologize for being so immature and prejudiced. But most communities have a some place that they think of as a backwater town and for us it was Duvall. I'm sure there were people around that thought all the hicks lived in Kirkland ... and maybe we did.

We regarded Duvall the way Nathanael regarded Nazareth. He was from Cana, about 10 miles north of Nazareth and much more sophisticated. So he had a hard time imagining that what Philip told him could possibly be true. The scriptures anticipated the coming of a Messiah. But nothing good ever came out of obscure Nazareth let alone the Messiah.¹ In effect, Nathanael was saying, "No way, Philip! You've been taken in by a good ol' country boy. Messiah? From Nazareth? No way."

Nathanael's skepticism actually fulfilled what John's Gospel has already told us. Remember

¹ J. N. Sanders, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968) 103.

the opening verses of the Gospel which we which we read on Christmas Eve? In those magnificent verses that describe the Word of God — the Logos — becoming incarnate in human life, John says the Logos “was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.” (John 1.10-11) Nathanael’s reaction to Philip was a case in point. The world had come into being through the Logos but when the Logos came into the world, it did not recognize him.

Nathanael’s problem and the world’s problem and, indeed, our problem, is not that God comes to us in ways that are too grand to understand. No, the opposite is the problem. God comes to us in ways that are too small and we don’t pay attention. Nathanael couldn’t get past the unimaginable idea that the Messiah was from Nazareth. I would have reacted the same way if I had been told the Messiah was from Duvall. But the truth is that God is always coming to us in small ways. God is always coming to us from Nazareth and Duvall, from places where we least expect God. We just need to be alert and have eyes to see and ears to hear.

That’s the whole point of Christmas although we have so glamorized it and sentimentalized it that we often miss the point. But if we could defy Einstein’s physics and take a time machine back to when Jesus was born and if we pretended to not know the story because it hadn’t happened yet but only that we knew the Messiah was to be born, do you think we would look in a dinky little village like Bethlehem? Do you think we would ask some smelly old shepherds out in the fields if they had heard anything about a Messiah? Do you think we might expect a thirteen year-old girl like Mary, born into the perpetual poverty that gripped almost everyone, to be the Messiah’s mother? I don’t think so. We expect God in the grand things. But the truth is God most always comes from unexpected places. We just have to be open to that possibility and come and see.

TWO: What brings us to faith?

Okay, let’s assume that at least sometimes we are alert to the small, quiet, unexpected ways God comes to us: the voice of a friend or parent or child or Sunday school teachers, maybe even albeit rarely, a preacher’s voice. Let’s assume that and ask a second question: what actually brings us to faith? Why does faith become compelling for us?

Nathanael had faith in Jesus when he discovered that the Lord knew him even before they had met. “Where did you get to know me?” Nathanael asked. Jesus said, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” In other words, God’s call to Nathanael was happening even before he heard Philip’s words which expressed that call. So Nathanael saw that Jesus was somehow different and that difference brought about faith in Nathanael. The same is true for all who have found faith in Jesus. Something about him is different and we are drawn to that.

I read about a man who visited a Baptist church in Moscow, Russia. This was several years before all the changes which shook apart the former Soviet Union. The visitor said, “In the midst of so much that was drab and dull and organized, here were people gathered to praise God and to rejoice in his love. It made no difference that they were packed together — over two thousand of them, and so many of them standing — or that the service lasted over two hours. They had waited all week for this experience of worship. No wonder many of them wept as they heard the word or joined in prayer or song.”²

² Floyd W. Thatcher, ed., *The Splendor of Easter* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972) 122.

Isn't it amazing that after all those decades of communism people should gather for that kind of worship? After all, the official line in the Soviet Union was that religion was sheer nonsense — just a myth and not a very good myth at that. There was sometimes bitter persecution and at best a restricted tolerance of any talk about or worship of God. By all normal standards the church should have died in the Soviet Union. Yet Christians were singing hymns, praising God, and baptizing believers. The church grew in Russia despite all that opposed it.

How do we account for that? Why does faith in God become compelling when there is no visible reason for it? I think it has to do with a story that Billy Graham used to tell. It is said that in Spain a father and his teenage son named Paco had a relationship that had become strained. So the son ran away from home. His father, however, began a journey in search of his rebellious son. Finally, in Madrid, in a last, desperate effort to find him, the father put a personal ad in the newspaper. It read: "Dear Paco, meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. I love you. Your father."

The next day at noon in front of the newspaper office 800 "Pacos" showed up. They were all seeking forgiveness and love from their fathers.³ Yes, Paco is a common name in Spain. But what is even more common is the longing to be in a right relationship with those who love us and the ultimate longing is to be in a right relationship with God. That's why faith in Jesus becomes compelling. It accomplishes the thing we most need and long for.

Jesus told Nathanael, "You will see greater things than these.... [Y]ou will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." When you are steeped in the scriptures as Jesus was and as were most of the people of that day, you cannot think of the image of an open heaven and angels going up and down without recalling the story of Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28.10-17). Jacob, whose name was changed by God to Israel, was the physical and spiritual forebear of Nathanael. He had a dream one night of a ladder reaching into an open heaven and the angels were going back and forth. The Gospel is saying that what Jacob the Israelite dreamed about, Nathanael the Israelite saw fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus Christ is the connection between an open heaven and earth. Jesus is the revelation of God. Jesus is the Word, the Logos, come down from heaven into human life to give us the clear, eternal word from heaven: "All is forgiven. I love you." That's what brings about faith in Jesus.

Conclusion

A shipping company advertised a job opening for a ship's radio operator and the outer office was crowded with applicants for the position. Of course, to be a radio officer on a ship you need to know Morse code. So the applicants, all of whom did know Morse code, were waiting to be called in for an interview. They were talking to each other rather loudly and on the wall a loudspeaker was making some noise.

Another applicant entered, filled out an application, and sat quietly for a few moments. Suddenly, he got up and walked into the office marked "private." A few minutes later he came out wearing a smile. He had been hired.

³ From a bulletin for a Billy Graham Crusade in Southern California. Quoted from *The Pastor's Story File* 14.3 (1986): 2.

Someone who had been waiting a long time protested. “Hey, man, we were here first. Why did you go in there before us?”

The successful applicant replied, “Any one of you could have landed that job, but none of you was listening to the Morse code signals coming over the loudspeaker. The message was, ‘We desire to fill this position with someone who is constantly alert. If you are getting this message, come into the private office immediately.’”⁴

Dear friends, the message of God’s love in Jesus Christ is coming to us all the time in all sorts of quiet ways from unexpected places. Be alert and listen for the Word from an open heaven: “All is well; be at peace.” Then come and see.

⁴ Michael Hodgkin, ed., *Parables, Etc.* 12.7 (1992): 1.