

Can Anything Good?

John 1:43-51

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The Gospel of John, like Genesis, begins with the creation of everything: “In the beginning...” But Genesis describes what happened, and in detail. John tells us how: “In the beginning was the Word...through [whom] all things were made.”

That only takes a few paragraphs; then John jumps right into what we know today as the message of Christianity: that this amazing creative force called the Word, which brought everything into existence, is also a person, Jesus, a man from a little town called Nazareth.

This is John’s abrupt way of introducing us to Jesus as both the beginning of creation and a part of the present. Now, John tells us about how God in Jesus began his work.

Every one of us has pulled together a team, some people to do something, even if it was a foursome for bridge or golf or a business – or a church committee! Jesus is in Galilee, is putting together the team he’s going to use to change the world.

It’s a neat story. Philip sees something special in Jesus right away, though we aren’t told what. Has this ever happened to you? You meet someone and just know *right then* that you’ve met someone special? Perhaps, you even feel a bond? I think so. Philip has to tell Nathaniel about Jesus.

But this isn’t easy. As soon as Philip blurts out his news, Nathaniel gives his two-second opinion of folks from Nazareth: not worth much, or, as he says, “Can anything good come from there?” Sort of like someone saying, can anything good come out of Arivaca?

Now, think about this. Most of us are proud of where we came from, or at least something that we’ve been a part of. Valerie and I sit on opposite sides of the couch when the Army-Navy game is on. We both push back at criticism of our branch of service. What about your hometown, state or school? *You* can criticize, maybe, but not anyone else.

At the same time, there’s something else: a bit of familiarity – as in “familiarity breeds contempt”. If one of my high school classmates made it big, really big, I’d brag about it; but to myself, I might be thinking, “Jeez, that’s just old Joe. I remember the time he cost us that game against Remsen. He’s not that special, really.”

That’s what people do; that’s what Nathaniel did. There’s a tension between special and ordinary, pride and contempt. That’s a big part of this lesson, even Christianity itself. After all, we know who Jesus is: Jesus is just like us, but not really. Jesus is the son of Mary and Joseph, but also the Word of God. Jesus is complicated; there’s a lot to him,

just as there is to each of us. He simply isn't easy to understand, and when we try, we often end up leaning more to one side than the other. Have you ever under – or overestimated someone? It isn't hard to do with people; it certainly wasn't hard to do with Jesus.

So it's not surprising that Nathaniel was skeptical about Philip's report on Jesus. We can be like that, too.

And in a way, that makes sense, doesn't it, since Jesus' work is still going on.

Jesus, that ordinary but complicated person, is *still* pulling together a team. He didn't stop with Andrew and Peter and Philip and Nathaniel – or any of the other disciples we read about in the Gospels. The story goes on...He's still calling out players for his side; he's never stopped. And your name is on his list.

There's the problem. Not everyone is comfortable being called. Maybe you're one of the people who always got picked first when you chose up sides as children; maybe you were usually one of the last. Some people assume automatically that they will get chosen; others have a hard time believing they ever will be.

Years ago, psychologists used to talk about the "imposter syndrome." Basically, a person with the imposter syndrome has a self-image that says, "if you knew who I really was you'd know I don't deserve what I have. I'm only here because someone made a mistake. I may be the CEO, but someday they'll see who I *really* am." (joke about optimist and pessimist)

That's the human piece of our calling, our chosen-ness. Whether we feel worthy or not, God calls you and me, just as Jesus called Philip and Nathaniel, not because he doesn't know us, really, but because he does. Just as it says in the Psalm, "God, you knew me before I was born, as I was being formed in secret, in the limbo of the womb."

The new Ruling Elders and Deacons we ordained and installed last week were nominated by a committee and then by your vote brought to their positions in the church. It's complicated: there're teachers and bankers and fire chiefs among them.

But they were chosen. And you, in electing them, called them, spoke to them as the voice of the Holy Spirit to special roles in this church, at this time.

Jesus knows Nathaniel. Jesus knows you too. God knew us before we were born, knows you now better than you know yourself, and still wants you here.

There's one more thing: when Jesus met Nathaniel, he said, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." That's an odd statement, but it's an important part of what the Gospel of John is trying to tell us about God's call.

To get this we have to back to Genesis. The name Israel was first given by God to Jacob. "Israel" means "one who wrestles with God." Jacob literally did wrestle with God, which is how he got that name - in fact, "Israel" became the name of his whole people.

Jacob's life was complicated. He was not some sort of holy man – in fact, he was *deceitful* – a liar, cheat, and a thief. He starts out by fighting his twin brother Esau at birth, trying to get out of his mother's womb first. When he grows up, he cheats his brother out of his inheritance, and generally is pretty crooked – but yet God chooses him to be a key part in the ancestral line of his chosen people, who are called by his God-

given name, Israel. Even though Jacob followed God, he wrestled with him every step of the way.

God works through people like Jacob, and people like Nathaniel, who Jesus says is everything Jacob isn't. Even Nathaniel, honest as he was, had to wrestle with his understanding of how God might be working in him: he wondered how Jesus, anyone important, could come out of Nazareth.

Nathaniel and Jacob weren't the only ones who wrestled with God. Maybe we don't wrestle with God literally like Jacob did; but I'm pretty sure that at some point or another, we've had a few wrestling matches.

The point is God can call and use anyone, including you and me. We may not see it at the time – in fact, we may never recognize it – but that doesn't mean it isn't happening. Remember that Jesus *did* come from Nazareth, and you are here, and called to be here.