

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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The Eyes of Faith

John 1:35-51

There used to be a sign on the wall of our church foyer. It greeted all who came through the doors with a simple but potentially life-changing invitation: "Come, Consider Jesus." Yes, we want you to meet and get to know other people in the congregation. We want you to meet and get to know the pastor. We want you to meet and get to know us. But most of all, we want you to meet and get to know Jesus.

After all, Jesus is the reason that we can even speak of "us." This congregation is composed of individuals who have heard and responded to the invitation to come and meet Jesus. That's the way the faith gets transmitted and disciples get made. One person says to another, "I follow Jesus and invite you to do so too." One person tells another person, who tells another person, who tells another person. If you're someone who knows the Lord Jesus, then you have a chain of witnesses to thank. You have a network of people who came and saw, and invited you to come and see.

That's the way it works in today's text. John the Baptist directs Andrew and another one of his disciples to Jesus. Jesus invites them to come and see. After spending some time with Jesus, Andrew goes and gets his brother Peter and brings him to Jesus. Soon Jesus finds Philip and calls him to follow. Then Philip goes and finds Nathanael and brings him to meet Jesus. By the end of the second day, photos were already being posted on everyone's favorite social media platforms. "Here I am standing with this guy Jesus. He's the one we've been waiting for. Come and see."

Of course not everyone comes to faith in Jesus in exactly the same way at exactly the same speed. In today's text, things move along pretty quickly. John gives us a tight and streamlined account of Jesus' first disciples. Nathanael, the last follower in this opening sequence, initially expresses some skepticism about Jesus, largely because of where Jesus comes from. When most people thought of the Messiah, they didn't think of Nazareth. So Nathanael doesn't rush to sign on with Jesus and his small band of disciples.

But the invitation is the same. "Come and see" (v. 46). Notice that Jesus doesn't require Nathanael to check his doubts at the door. He's welcome to bring his questions and uncertainties into the dialogue. There's plenty of room for searching, asking, and exploring. Plus, it's not all about how perfectly Nathanael knows Jesus. It's also about how completely Jesus knows Nathanael. Turns out that even before Nathanael has come seeking Jesus, Jesus has been seeking him. While Nathanael is still approaching, Jesus, who's never met him face to face, calls Nathanael a "true Israelite" (v. 47). In other words, a genuine member of the people of God, faithful and righteous.

"How do you know me?" asks Nathanael. Jesus says, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you" (v. 48). Now that sounds rather strange. What's going on here? Has Jesus been following a digital trail created by Nathanael's cell phone? Did Nathanael snap a selfie and post it online, creating a path of metadata that enables Jesus to track Nathanael's movement and pinpoint his precise location, thus knowing that he was

under a particular fig tree, at a particular time, on a particular day? Is that why Jesus says, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

It's hard to get at the precise meaning of Jesus' statement. There has also been a lot of speculation about the significance of the fig tree. But we don't have to nail down the meaning of all the details in order to get at the essence of what Jesus is saying. The focus of the story is on Jesus' superhuman knowledge and its effect on Nathanael. Jesus already knows Nathanael, fully and completely, and that's what initiates the opportunity for Nathanael to know Jesus and believe in him.

The first verse of the old hymn "Amazing Grace" reminds us of where we should put the accent in the divine-human relationship: "Amazing grace! how sweet the sound, / That saved a wretch like me! / I once was lost, but now *am found*, / Was blind, but now I see." So coming to faith in Jesus is less about finding him and more about first being found by him. Nathanael's experience calls us back to God's gracious initiative in our lives. True, there's lots of language in the first chapter of John about how the call to discipleship demands a response. We're summoned to follow, seek, stay, and find. In other words, you need to be active, involved, and engaged with Jesus. But all this is made possible because Christ has first known you and has come seeking you. He's the one who opens your eyes to see who he is, why he has come, and what you need to do with your life.

God seeing and knowing us is the grace that enables us to see and know God, and to see and know one another. Our assurance and hope, especially during times like these, is that our lives are not invisible to God. He does not close his eyes to our condition. No, into the darkness of our sins and our circumstances, God comes. John says, "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world ... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (1:9,14). The God who sees opens our eyes to see his glory revealed in Christ, most of all in the cross. There in the suffering and death of Jesus, God's knowledge of us and his desire to be known by us, is unveiled for us to see.

Last Easter, one pastor reminded listeners of a place called Hart Island. He said:

Hart Island is found a little way off the coast of Long Island. Nobody lives on Hart Island. It is the home, though, of a million bodies—bodies that have been buried there. It's a place that's known as a potter's field. It's a place meant for the homeless, the stillborn, poor immigrants, poets, and artists who died penniless. It's a wasteland for the forgotten dead.

But its newest additions are those who have died from the coronavirus. (During the Covid-19 crisis they dug) ... a mass grave on Hart Island. All of these bodies are placed in cheap, crate-like coffins, set side-by-side, as backhoes and men in hazmat suits cover them over with dirt. People dying without dignity, dying with disease, being buried, and being buried safely so as to contain the disease that still resides in their decaying skin.

On Hart Island, in the very middle of the island, there is a large, white cross, with black letters inscribed on the horizontal beam. Those letters read out this way: HE KNOWS US ALL BY NAME.¹

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked Jesus. "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." Jesus saw and knew Nathanael under the fig tree. Jesus sees and knows the dead in forgotten cemeteries. Jesus sees and knows you at home in your confinement, isolation, and loneliness. Jesus sees and knows you in your hospital room. Jesus sees and knows you when you sit staring at your computer screen, trying to complete another school assignment. Jesus sees and knows you as you report for work at

an essential yet dangerous and underappreciated job. Remember that you are not invisible to the Son of God, who has made God visible to us.

Authors Lance Ford and Brad Briscoe have written about the profound loneliness that so many people experience in our world, which contributes to the sense that they have very little value at all. Ford and Briscoe point out that we even contribute to others' lack of a sense of self-worth by such things as failing to lift our heads to offer a simple greeting. They contrast this with the practice that author Peter Senge noticed among the tribes of northern Natal in South Africa:

The most common greeting, equivalent to "hello" in English, is the expression: *Sawu bona*. It literally means, "I see you." If you are a member of the tribe, you might reply by saying *Sikhona*, "I am here." The order of the exchange is important: until you see me, I do not exist. It's as if, when you see me, you bring me into existence.²

Being seen by God and becoming a disciple of Jesus makes a difference in how you see. It makes a difference in how you see God, and in how you see others. When Nathanael realizes the insight that Jesus has into him, even before he and Jesus met, that's when Nathanael's eyes are opened and he confesses Jesus as the Son of God, the one who has come from God for our salvation. But that's just the beginning point of Nathanael's faith. Jesus promises Nathanael that he will see even "greater things" (v. 50) and deepen in his faith. No doubt that will include how Nathanael sees others.

When you and I look at other people, we need to see them with the eyes of faith. This means seeing them as people made in God's image, people known by God, people for whom Christ died. This is especially true when you look at people of a different race, ethnicity, class, or cultural background. On this weekend when we remember the life and witness of Martin Luther King Jr., we recall some of the most memorable words from his "I Have a Dream" speech, when he declared, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

King wasn't calling us to ignore race, or to pretend that it doesn't matter. Diversity and difference of race is part of the beauty of the world God has made, the humanity God has created, and we should delight in that. Granted, there's truth and value in looking beyond skin color to see the dignity and value of every individual. But being committed to colorblindness has its dangers too. Sometimes colorblindness keeps us from recognizing and addressing racial disparities and inequities that still exist. When we look at one another, we need to see skin color, and acknowledge the ways that racial division and injustice have shaped our identities, especially the identity of black Americans.

So in one respect, we need to be color-conscious. We need to recognize the differences that exist because of history, background, and experience. But at the same time, we need to realize that there's more to human identity than just race. When we look at one another, we need to remember that what matters most isn't skin color, but who we are in Christ. God coming to us in the flesh, knowing us fully, redeeming us, and making it possible for us to be children born of the Spirit—that's what defines us most. And that's why we continue to extend an invitation that crosses racial lines and breaks down barriers with a simple summons: "Come and see." Come and see Jesus. Come to know the one who already knows you. Come and let him give you the eyes of faith.

¹ Ethan Magness, "Hart Island Will Rise—An Easter Reflection." Grace Anglican Church website. April 12, 2020. Accessed January 14, 2021 <<http://graceanglicanonline.com/podcast/hart-island-will-rise-an-easter-reflection/>>.

² Lance Ford and Brad Briscoe, *Next Door As It Is in Heaven* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2016) 76.