

Title: Being Found by God: The discovery of God's intimate love

Subtitle: Finding that Jesus is with us, loves us, and knows us.

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/yi5S2DXTZfg>

The themes of “seeking,” “finding,” and “following” are repeated over and over again in our Gospel today. Our lesson begins with Jesus’ decision to go to Galilee, where he finds Philip. In his excitement, Philip finds Nathanael and says to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth.”¹

The theme of finding and seeking is interwoven throughout salvation history. In the third chapter of Genesis, after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and were hiding from God, the Lord calls out to them, asking, “Where are you?”²

The theme comes to the forefront in the Gospels when Jesus states, “The Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.”³ And he is still seeking us today in mysterious and manifold ways. And as the Spirit begins to draw us to him, there is something in all of us that longs to be found.

When my grandchildren come for a visit, their favorite game they want me to play is “Hide and Seek,” and I love to join in because I am a big kid at heart. The thrill of hiding and being found is something that never bores them. In one instance, Molly was hiding behind a curtain, and she screamed with delight when I ripped the curtain away and said, “I found you,” But, if I don’t find her quick enough, she calls out and gives me hints as to where she is.

¹ John 1:45

² Genesis 3:9

³ Luke 19:10

I share that story because the desire to be found is something that resides in all of us. It is a theme that surrounds Nathanael's story with its surprise and discovery.

The story unfolds as Philip goes out of his way to find Nathanael and says to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus Son of Joseph from Nazareth."⁴ But Nathanael immediately expresses skepticism and asks, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Evidently, Nazareth had a widely held Public Relations problem. The region was a crossroads for foreign commerce where pagan philosophies and religions abound. Modern archaeologists recently discovered a first-century Roman garrison there, which additionally made it a center for foreign domination.

Knowing that Nathanael had good reason for his skepticism, Philip simply replied: "Come and see."

When the two of them meet, Jesus greets him with the words: "Behold an Israelite in whom there is no guile." More modern translations say, "Here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit,"⁵ or as some paraphrased translations say, "free from hypocrisy and self-deception."

Nathanael responds: "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus says: "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."⁶ Because the fig tree's wide-spreading branches provided thick shade, it was considered a symbol of shelter and was used as a place for prayer and quiet reflection. So, I can't help but wonder if Nathanael was sitting under that fig tree, pouring out his heart to God. As I place myself in the story, I can easily imagine that Nathanael was either going through a difficult time

⁴ John 1:45

⁵ John 1:47

⁶ John 1:48

or was facing a perplexing challenge to his faith. So imagine the surprise and burst of joyous energy he experienced when he discovered that Jesus knew exactly where he was and what he was thinking and going through. He sees and loves us even when no one else is looking—when we are all alone under our own symbolic fig tree, with all our doubts, fears, and confusion included. The Psalm appointed for today says, “Lord, you have searched me out and known me. You discern my thoughts from afar. There is not a word on my lips, but you, O Lord, know it altogether.”⁷

When Nathanael realizes that Jesus has this incredible knowledge about him, he makes an astounding claim, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”⁸

Nathanael’s choice of words is instructive. A *Rabbi* was a term of respect the Hebrews developed for their teachers. “The word was formed from the Hebrew root meaning great,”⁹ and it developed into a designation meaning “Great Teacher” or My Master and Teacher.” Therefore, “it is used by those who put themselves under the tutelage of another in order to learn, grow, and mature.”¹⁰ Due to this expression of faith and submission, many scholars believe that Nathanael was the proper name for Bartholomew (a surname meaning Son of Tolmai), who was listed as one of the twelve disciples in the other three synoptic Gospels. He was also recorded by name among the disciples Jesus appeared to after his resurrection in John chapter 21.

When Jesus said of Nathanael, “Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile,”¹¹ he was comparing Nathanael to Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel, due to his persistence in

⁷ Psalm 139:4

⁸ John 1:49

⁹ Strong’s Concordance, # 4461, rhabbi (hrab-bee’)

¹⁰ Robert J. Morgan, “He Shall Be Called: 150 Names of Jesus”, p.216

¹¹ John 1:47

wrestling with the angel of the Lord. Jacob “would not let God go until he blessed (him).”¹² Therefore, an Israelite was a name for those who believed in God and were, therefore, justified and counted as righteous. The name Israel in Hebrew means “Having power with God, or God’s fighter.”¹³ So here is a man who truly represents what it means to be a true believer, even though he came to Jesus with serious questions and prejudiced ideas. This is instructive; for to have genuine faith, you have to wrestle (like Jacob did) with God regardless of the baggage we may carry that would make you feel unworthy. Jacob was far from perfect, and neither are we. Therefore, we no longer have to pretend. If we have any issues, we can raise them, for if Jesus affirmed Nathanael by giving him one of the highest compliments he had ever made, calling him “a true Israelite indeed,” then we, too, can come to him with whatever questions or problems we may have. In the end, Jesus assures Nathanael that he will “*...see greater things than these, for you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.*”¹⁴

I was drawn to the Episcopal Church because we are a community that gives each other room to grow and ask questions. This is a place where faith is discovered because you don’t have to pretend. Therefore, I hope that during these perplexing and confusing times, we can find that Jesus is with us, loves us, and knows us. He is not aloof and separate but knows each of us intimately. So, let’s take hold of his promises and believe that we have power with God because his angels are ascending and descending before the throne of God with answers to our prayers. *Amen.*

¹² Genesis 32:28

¹³ Strong’s Concordance, Yisrael (yis-raw-ale’), Definition: “God strives”, another name of Jacob

¹⁴ John 1:51 paraphrased