

**“More Than We Imagined from Less Than We Expected”**

**John 1:43-51**

**April 7, 2019**

**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**

*Pr. Nicoletti*

Our Scripture reading this morning is from the Gospel of John, chapter one, verses forty-three through fifty-one. Please listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

<sup>43</sup> The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” <sup>44</sup> Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. <sup>45</sup> Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” <sup>46</sup> Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” <sup>47</sup> Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” <sup>48</sup> Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” <sup>49</sup> Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” <sup>50</sup> Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” <sup>51</sup> And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

This is the word of the Lord.

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, as the author of psalm 119 does,  
we ask you to work now through this, your word to your servants,  
the very word in which you have helped us to place our hope.  
For, our comfort in the afflictions we face in this world,  
is that your promises in your word give us life.  
Though the world may deride us,  
we do not turn from this, your revelation to us.  
Teach us from it now, we ask, in Jesus’s name. Amen.  
[Based on Psalm 119:49-51]

As we come to the last portion of the first chapter of John’s Gospel, we see Christ continue to gather disciples to himself, we see how they respond to him, and we see what he initially has to say to them.

The call of Philip happens quickly in verses forty-three and forty-four and the rest of the chapter is focused on the call of Nathanael, which is initiated by Philip in verse forty-five.

We saw last Lord’s Day how in the calls of Andrew, Peter, and another disciple the theme of testimony emerged. That theme continues here in this paragraph, but another theme is added to

it. As we look at this paragraph more closely, the theme that we see emerge here is that God brings more than we imagined from less than we expected.

Or turned around in the order we see it in our text, we see that God uses less than we expected to bring about more than we imagined.

So, we'll look at our text and see at least two ways that pattern plays out in our passage, and we'll ask how that pattern relates to us.

The first and primary place we see this theme play out is that *in Jesus Christ* God uses less than we expected to bring about more than we imagined.

The fact that Jesus is less than what was expected hits us right in Nathanael's first words.

Take a look at verse forty-five and the first half of verse forty-six: <sup>45</sup> Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." <sup>46</sup> Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Philip shows up and in his own way tells Nathanael that they have found, the Messiah – the promised one whom Moses and the prophets pointed to. Having identified the role of this individual, he then identifies the individual whom he believes will fulfill this role: Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

And Nathanael responds: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Nathanael had certain expectations for the Promised One, the great hope of Israel – expectations about who he would be and where he might come from ... and Nazareth fell well short of those expectations.

That phrase "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" may have been a local proverb that reflected rivalry between Nathanael's town of Cana and nearby Nazareth. [Brown, 83] But more than simple rivalry seems to be indicated. We are getting a picture of where Jesus's background fit in the overall scheme of things among first-century Jews.

D.A. Carson writes: "As Galileans were frequently despised by people from Judea, so it appears that even fellow Galileans despised Nazareth." [Carson, 160]

In other words, while many Israelites looked down on people from Galilee, within Galilee other Galileans looked down on those who were from Nazareth. And *that* is where Jesus was from. And everyone knew it – it wasn't hidden. Despite his birth in Bethlehem, Jesus is not referred to as "Jesus of Bethlehem" throughout the Gospels, but as "Jesus of Nazareth." [Carson, 160]

And so when Nathanael hears Philip claim that he has found the One promised in the Hebrew Scriptures, the One who is the hope of Israel ... and when he then hears that this great hope is from Nazareth ... whether it was an intentional jab at what Philip had said or something he just blurted out without thinking, Nathanael cannot help asking: Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

It makes me wonder what our “Nazareths” are.

What are the aspects of Jesus that are ... less than we or those around us might expect for the one who is the hope for this world?

What are the aspects of Jesus that make it hard for people to believe that he is the key to rightly understanding what it means to be a human being, what it means to live life rightly, and what it looks like to rightly relate to God and the world around us?

One of the chief aspects that is a stumbling block for many modern people today is that Jesus’s earthly ministry, and the sources of the Scriptures that record it, now lies so far in the distant past. The past is not a highly esteemed place in our culture. It is not where people look for their key hope in life, for a model on how to live, or for an understanding of what it means to be a human being. We look down on those in the past for what we assume are their backwards views of humanity and morality.

We hear it in a range of places, particularly in the question of why anyone would base their life on a book written thousands of years ago.

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor notes that this perspective is assumed even in our everyday language. He writes: “we say that X isn’t living in our century, that Y has a ‘medieval’ mind, while Z, whom we admire, is way ahead of her time.” [Taylor, 29]

A similar sentiment is behind statements like: “How could they think that? It’s 2019, after all!”

And so, when you tell someone that the key to their life now and for eternity is a Palestinian carpenter who lived two thousand years ago ... the response you can often expect is a chronological variation on “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

That is one common “Nazareth” for modern people.

It’s possible that for some of us, who have been given a counter-culturally positive view of history, especially Biblical history, the objection to the ancient nature of Christ’s words falls flat for us. We don’t struggle with that.

But we often have other things – maybe things we mostly ignore about Christ.

In a culture that values white-collar work, prestige, and financial success, do we keep in mind that the One the Scriptures hold out as our king was a tradesman from a modest background? In a subculture that values self-sufficiency, do we remember that our Lord relied on support from others in his ministry? In our more patriotic subcultures do we remember that the Bible says our ultimate allegiance is to a man who lived his whole life in the Middle-East? In a congregation where most of us are white, do we remember that the man who is our only hope in life and in death is a man with skin a lot darker than most of us here? In a culture that values the approval of others, do we remember that we serve someone who was decried by his peers and executed by the powers that be?

There are a lot of “Nazareths” about Jesus that are an offense to some and are ignored by others. But they are there.

Now in each case, we should acknowledge that our “Nazareths” are both foolish and ... to some extent evil. Nathanael’s disparagement of a neighboring city appears to us for what it is: both foolish and morally ugly. And so, with our other “Nazareths”. We acknowledge this with things like racism more easily. Misused patriotism (not patriotism in general, but *misused* patriotism) is one that is easier for some to see as problematic than it is for others to see. Classism is, I think, more insidious and entrenched in our culture than we tend to realize. But we should realize that it’s an ugly thing.

And the chronological arrogance that dismisses the past is no better. It is one thing to acknowledge that we have advanced in science and technology beyond those who lived thousands of years ago. It is another to insist that we are fundamentally morally or spiritually superior to those who came before us. It is a claim that one group is inherently more in tune with God and with right and wrong than another – and whether the claim is made between ethnically divided groups or chronologically divided groups, it is doing the same thing. And it is foolish and arrogant and ugly.

Be that all as it may ... though our disparagements of different “Nazareths” are foolish and often evil ... even so ... maybe especially so ... God enjoys using them to upend and change the world.

As the Apostle Paul reminds us in First Corinthians, God seems to like using the things despised by the world to shame the strong and powerful. *The details might look different in some ways from culture to culture, but God delights in bringing salvation out of Nazareths.*

And yet ... it causes many to struggle, as Nathanael does here. He hears Philip’s claim, and he cannot help but object: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

And in our own ways, if we are honest, at first glance Jesus can often look like less than we expected for the direction of our lives and the hope of the world.

That is the first thing we see in our text. But the text doesn’t stop there.

Because the next thing we see is that though Jesus is less than we may expect in certain ways, he is at the same time more than we ever imagined.

After Nathanael’s objection, Philip urges him to come and see. Then we pick up in verse forty-seven: <sup>47</sup>Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” <sup>48</sup>Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” <sup>49</sup>Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Jesus here identifies something about Nathanael: he is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit. Now ... a claim like that implies that you know something rather deep about the other person, and Jesus and Nathanael appear to just be meeting, so Nathanael is understandably a bit incredulous: “How do you know me?” he asks. And Jesus tells him he saw him under the fig tree. Now ... we don’t know the significance of what Jesus says here. We just know that it was significant for Nathanael. It signaled to Nathanael in some way the supernatural knowledge that

Jesus had of him. And Nathanael is taken aback, and suddenly convinced that Jesus is the promised one. He exclaims “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Now ... Jesus is about to say something to expand Nathanael’s understanding of who he is, and so we need to make sure we rightly understand Nathanael’s words in verse forty-nine.

Most importantly, we need to recognize that when Nathanael calls Jesus the “Son of God” here, he most likely did not mean what *we* mean when we say, “Son of God.” *We* mean that Jesus is God himself – the second person of the Trinity. And that’s what we should mean.

But for a first century Jew like Nathanael, the phrase “Son of God” was just another way of saying “King of Israel.” Because that’s how the concept is often used in the Hebrew Scriptures – in our Old Testament.

In both Exodus and Hosea God refers to Israel as his son. [Exodus 4:22; Hosea 11:1] And then that idea of sonship grows and develops and comes to be seen as embodied in a special way in the human king of Israel, so that in 2 Samuel 7:14, God describes David’s son Solomon by saying “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.” And so, the king of Israel is described as the Son of God.

So even though that concept would undergo a much more significant stage of development with the incarnation, for Nathanael, as he speaks, we should expect that he is using the phrase as any first century Jew might: as a title for the Messiah, for the King of Israel.

And so, when Nathanael looks at Jesus and says “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” he is saying the same thing in two different ways. Like we might say to the President “You are the President of the United States! You are the Commander in Chief!”

And this seems especially important because Jesus is about to tell Nathanael that as the Messiah he is even more than Nathanael imagined.

In verse fifty and fifty-one we therefore read: <sup>50</sup> Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” <sup>51</sup> And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

Since the time of Saint Augustine Christians have recognized in that last verse a reference to Genesis 28. [Brown, 89]

In Genesis 28 we are with the patriarch Jacob, who would later have his name changed to Israel and be known as the father of the nation of Israel. But in Genesis 28 things do not yet look so promising. Jacob is alone and fleeing from his brother who wants to kill him. And we read in Genesis 28:10-17:

<sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. <sup>11</sup> And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. <sup>12</sup> And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were

ascending and descending on it! <sup>13</sup> And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.”

From there God promises to give Jacob’s offspring the land promised to Abraham, he promises to make Jacob’s offspring a great nation, he promises to bless all families of the earth through Jacob’s descendants, and he promises to be with Jacob wherever he goes.

Then in verse sixteen and seventeen we read:

<sup>16</sup> Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” <sup>17</sup> And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

Jesus is drawing a comparison between this scene and himself – he is telling us that this time and place where heaven and earth come together points to him. Or as one commentator puts it: “the vision means that Jesus as the Son of Man has become the locus of divine glory, the point of contact between heaven and earth.” [Brown, 91] *That* is the point Jesus is making here.

Nathanael expected a human king for the Messiah. Jesus is saying that the Messiah will be so much more than that – he will be the point of contact, the portal, between heaven and earth.

Nathanael did not get that at the time. I wonder sometimes if we do either ...

As I’ve mentioned before, I tend to like some forms of science fiction, and a show called Doctor Who is one I like in particular. In it, a character named “The Doctor” is an alien (who looks human) and who has a combination time machine and space ship called the TARDIS. He goes on lots of adventures, usually with human friends from earth. In an episode called “The Girl in the Fireplace” the Doctor takes two humans, Rose and Mickey, on a trip. They arrive on an abandoned space station, in the 51<sup>st</sup> century (3000 years in the future), about two-and-a-half galaxies away from earth. And though the space station is empty, it’s giving off A LOT of energy – and they’re not sure why. So, they begin to look around. And as they do, they find an 18<sup>th</sup> century French fireplace and mantle in one of the rooms of the space station. Which is odd. Now, the fireplace is up against the outer wall of the space-ship, so on the other end there should be nothing but outer space. But when they look into the fireplace, on the other end they see a little girl, who tells them that her name is Renet and she is in Paris, France in the year 1727. Which is even odder. After talking to the girl through the fireplace the three space travelers stand up and talk amongst themselves.

Mickey says to the Doctor: “You said this was the 51<sup>st</sup> century!”

The Doctor replies: “I also said this ship was generating enough energy to punch a hole in the universe. I think we just found the hole.”

The Doctor pauses and then says, “Must be a spatial-temporal hyperlink.”

Mickey looks at him and asks, “What’s that?”

The Doctor thinks for a minute and says “No idea ... just made it up ... I didn’t want to say ‘magic door.’”

Rose looks at them both and replies, “And on the other side of the ‘magic door’ is France in 1727.”

The doctor looks around the fireplace and soon finds how to travel through it to France in 1727, and that’s when things start to get really interesting. For the rest of the episode they use this and

other “magic doors” to travel between a space station 2 ½ galaxies away from earth in the 51<sup>st</sup> century, and Paris, France in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Now ... why on earth am I talking about this?

I know people have mixed feelings about science fiction ... but just as C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and others have found that the magic of fantasy can sometimes give us a vision of spiritual truths better than realist fiction can, I personally think the same can often be true of science fiction as well.

And one example of that is that something like a portal, “spatial-temporal hyperlink,” or a “magic door” can also give us a picture into a Biblical view of how heaven and earth – how God and humanity connect.

Since the fall – since Adam and Eve’s rebellion – God’s people have always known that a chasm exists between humanity and God. A huge chasm. Yes, in one sense God is in fact everywhere, but in another sense, we are separated from him. If a 51<sup>st</sup> century space station 2 ½ galaxies away from earth is a long way from 18<sup>th</sup> century France, then the distance between God and sinful humanity is even further.

And to bridge that chasm, God would in certain times and certain places create ... something like a “spatial-temporal hyperlink” or a “magic door.” *He would ... as the Doctor put it “punch a hole in the universe.”*

The temple was one such place.

And so was the spot where Jacob slept in Genesis 28.

Jesus is in effect saying that the disciples will come to see that he is not just a human king come to rescue them, but he is the link, the portal, the point of contact, the “magic door” between God and sinful humanity, between heaven and earth.

He is far more than they would have asked for or even imagined.

And that picture must have challenged Nathanael and the other disciples when Jesus said it.

I wonder if it challenges us as well.

We have certain categories we are comfortable thinking of Jesus in. We are to each hold on to all of them, though we each tend to be more comfortable with some than others. So, we see Jesus as the King whom we are called to obey. Or we see Jesus as the Teacher from whom we hope to learn. Or we see Jesus as the Savior who rescues us from sin and death. Or we see Jesus as the Judge who we will stand before one day. Or we see Jesus as the Great Physician who heals our spiritual wounds and diseases.

And all of those are true – all of them are good Biblical images.

But Jesus here is emphasizing for Nathanael and for us that he is also the ultimate bridge between heaven and earth, between God and ourselves. He is the only point of contact we have between where we are now, and where God is.

And that has several implications.

One is that there is no other way to God except through Christ. A view that all religions lead to God is often based on some assumption that there can be many man-made paths to reach God. But Jesus is reminding us here that the only way to God is through the path that God has made – through the hole that *he* has punched in the universe, and Jesus is that hole, he is that bridge, in a way that no other religious teacher can be, or even usually claims to be.

Another is that we cannot propel ourselves to God. You can not get yourself to God under your own power. You can only reach God in reliance on Jesus, the ladder between heaven and earth.

A third implication, which should be obvious but needs to be said, is that the spiritual realm is *real*. It's a real place. Those angels in Genesis 28 are coming to and from somewhere else. There is another place to travel to and from. We very easily adopt a flat disenchanted view of the world, with a brass ceiling over us, separating the imminent world from the transcendent. In Christ, God has punched a hole in that brass ceiling. We should not be deceived by those who claim it is still intact.

We could go on and on, but the point is this: Jesus is expanding how Nathanael views the Messiah, and in the process, he should be expanding how we think of him too. Where is your view of Jesus Christ too modest? Where is it too this-worldly? Where do you need to be reminded that Jesus Christ is the supernatural link between heaven and earth, the bridge where God punched a hole in the universe in order to redeem his world?

God brings more than we imagined from less than we expected.

Nathanael imagined a great human king and he expected him to come from a reputable town.

God instead used a man from Nazareth to bridge the chasm between heaven and earth.

And like Nathanael we should re-examine our view of Christ. In what worldly ways is he less than we expect, and in what spiritual ways is he more than we imagined? How have you lessened the depth of who Jesus Christ is and what he has done?

God uses less than we expected to bring about more than we imagined. We see that in our text in Jesus Christ.

But Jesus actually isn't the only place we see this.

We actually see this same theme play out in the people God uses. We see the same reality in the Church.

There we also see that God uses less than we expected. And we see it not only in the disciples themselves, but in the connection with Jacob.

There are a couple connections made between the disciples and Jacob in this text, but the central one is that if Jesus is the bridge between heaven and earth in Genesis 28, and the disciples are to see the angels ascending and descending on him, as he says in verse fifty-one, then the disciples are Jacob. And with that there are some parallels between Jacob in Genesis 28 and the disciples in John 1.

In Genesis 28, Jacob is a lone man, fleeing his own family members, one of whom is so mad he wants to kill him, sleeping with his head on a stone in the wilderness. This ... is the source of Israel, the nation of God's people in the Old Testament ... And he appears to be somewhat less at this moment than we might have expected ...

And similarly, the disciples at this point are not the most impressive bunch either. Jesus is calling together a renewed people of God and for that he's chosen ... mostly uneducated tradesmen, with not a respected or honored teacher among them.

We see playing out here an even fuller picture of that passage I alluded to earlier in First Corinthians chapter one. There the Apostle Paul writes *to the church* in Corinth: <sup>26</sup> For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, <sup>31</sup> so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

You look at Jacob in the book of Genesis and he is less than we might expect for the starting point of the new humanity ... but he is whom God has called for the life of the world.

You look at the twelve disciples throughout the Gospels and they are less than we might expect for the starting point of a renewed people of God ... but they are whom God has called for the life of the world.

And so often you can look at the Church today, whether at the universal level or the local level ... and it is less than we might expect for the driving force of the kingdom of God in this world ... but it is who God has called for the life of the world.

The Church, whether in the news, in the dynamics of our own congregation, or in a one-on-one interaction, can be less than we expected.

But our God delights to use what is weak and foolish, the low and despised, to upend the strong and the powerful.

And so not only has God called the Church, but he tells us that through it, he will do far more than we imagine.

The promises God makes to Jacob, which we summarized from Genesis 28 are stupendous claims, more than Jacob probably ever imagined for himself. But God has brought and is bringing them to pass.

And so with the disciples. Through their ministry, and through the ministry of those they ministered to, God fought off spiritual forces of darkness and upended the world we live in, eventually conquering the Roman Empire itself.

Augustine, preaching on this passage notes: “Our Lord Jesus Christ wished to crush the necks of the proud, and so he did not seek a fisherman through an orator; but by means of a fisherman he gained an emperor. Cyprian [the Church Father] was a great orator, but he is outranked by Peter the fisherman, through whom, later on, not only an orator but even an emperor came to believe.” [Augustine, Homily 7.17 (p. 160)]

We underestimate what God will do through the actions of the Church just faithfully being the Church.

When it comes to changing the world or changing people’s lives we often look elsewhere. We invest our hope in politics, or technology, or education. And those things are important, don’t get me wrong ... but if we were attentive to the Bible, if we were attentive to history ... then our expectations of what God might do through the Church simply being the Church would be so much higher. The God who used fishermen to conquer an emperor in the ancient world can surely use the imperfect Church to change lives and communities and even whole societies today.

And he does it through ordinary means.

Take the picture of Philip in our text. He testifies to Nathanael that they have found the Messiah – testifying just as we talked about last Lord’s Day.

And Nathanael responds with what sounds a like something between disbelief and mockery.

And what is the powerful line of argumentation that Philip uses to change Nathanael’s life?

Three words: “Come and see.”

If we believed that God uses less than we expect to bring about more than we imagine, then we would utter those words or their equivalent much more often than we do.

We would tell the one who is doubting, or the one who is struggling, or the one who rejects the faith some version of “Come and see.”

“Come and see” my life and my Christian walk more close-up – *not* because it’s perfect, but because it’s different and it is evidence that God works in the lives of even foolish sinners like me.

“Come and see” my family or my Christian community, not because they’re perfect, but because you can see the love of Christ in how they *try* to treat each other, and you can see the grace of Christ in the forgiveness they extend after they fail and hurt each other.

“Come and see” my church on Sunday morning ... not because it’s perfect, and not because everyone there is my ideal kind of person, and not because every sermon there is perfect, but

because here you can witness God calling, and forgiving, and instructing, and drawing close to his faithful-but-sometimes-disappointing people.

Through his people, God brings more than we imagine from less than we expect.

The pattern emerges again and again here.

God brings more than we imagined from less than we expected.

And our calling is to believe it in the person of Jesus Christ, recognizing his humility in how he came, and the magnificence in what he has done to bridge the gap between heaven and earth caused by our sin.

God brings more than we imagined from less than we expected.

And our calling is to believe it when it comes to ourselves and to Christ's Church, trusting that God has given the Church for the life of the world, and through the Church he will change lives, communities, and even societies.

God brings more than we imagine from less than we expect.

And our calling is to believe it so much that when we want to bless someone, when we want them to know God and his power to change lives, we say to them "Come and see" and we invite them to see Christ among Christ's people.

And as Christ ministers to us, and works through his people, and changes people's lives, we will in some sense catch a glimpse of heaven opening up, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

May God be so gracious as to grant us such an experience.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

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