

John 1:43-51

January 18, 2009

South Plains

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

the Nazareth of Albemarle County. “Could anything good come out of Crozet?”

Change: Greater Things Than These

Change is in the air. As soon as President Bush and President-elect Obama get into their limousines to head for the capital on Tuesday morning, one set of moving vans will load up the Bush furniture and take it to Dallas, Texas while another set of moving vans will unload the Obama furniture into the White House. But, maybe you’ve noticed that the closer we get to the inauguration, the more people are talking about the cost of change? Any significant changes in government will cost money; take time, more time than expected; means compromising political promises; and worst of all, they will require partnering with enemies. The old truism still works: everybody wants things to get better, but nobody likes change. “Change everything else,” we say, “but not my life.” Move other people’s cheese, but don’t mess with my world. Just make it better.

Jesus sees Nathanael and exclaims, “Here is truly an Israelite.” Nathanael wanted better things for his people and he hoped in the coming of the Messiah. But, Nathanael, like most of us, had some hurdles to overcome. When Philip first told him about Jesus of Nazareth, his response showed a fairly typical prejudice for his day, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” In other words, any Messiah had better fit into my preconceptions. When I was living in Crozet, we were

Jesus had a quick comeback and a long term solution for Nathanael’s blindness. He told Nathanael that he saw him under the fig tree, even before Philip told him about Jesus. That was a convincing demonstration of Jesus’ miraculous knowledge. Nathanael was so impressed that he cries out, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” It’s a quick conversion, but it’s not the kind of conversion that satisfies Jesus. “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet” Nathanael.”

“Do you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.”

Over the long term, Nathanael saw greater changes than he ever could have imagined. In the following chapters, Jesus heals the blind, feeds five thousand and raises Lazarus from the tomb. At the end of John’s gospel, Nathanael sees the resurrected Lord and eats with him on the seashore. Greater things, indeed.

We hope for greater things than we have seen thus far. Not just improvement in the stock market, although that would be a welcome change. And, not just an end to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, something everybody prays to see. We hope for more than an end to war, we hope for real security for our children and

nation. We hope for the good life that means a vibrant church, healthy families, stable communities with available health care, adequate jobs, strong schools and care for widows, orphans and all the needy. More personally and more importantly, we want a closer walk with God that will move us toward these goals with the integrity of the gospel and with the joy that comes from working and walking alongside Jesus.

In order to see greater things, we need to see Jesus the way Nathanael saw Jesus, the way the gospel of John sees Jesus. Scripture gives various titles to describe Jesus. I suspect the variety is intentional. We simply cannot capture the identity of this God-man in a single word or phrase. My desk dictionary lists 200,000 words in the English language. All the various combinations of those words are not adequate to describe the reality of the person we call Jesus. Because he's more than we can comprehend, this passage of nine verses uses six different designations for him.

Jesus is the

- 1) fulfillment of Moses and the prophets,
- 2) the son of Joseph from Nazareth,
- 3) Rabbi,
- 4) the Son of God,
- 5) the King of Israel, and
- 6) the Son of man.

One of the reasons I like this story of Nathanael meeting Jesus is that he's not one of heroes or saints of

the New Testament. I could only find one other reference to him. He shows up for the resurrection appearances at the end of this gospel. But, Matthew, Mark and Luke don't mention him at all. He's an ordinary guy, a little skeptical about Philip's enthusiasm and a little put off by Jesus' greeting. But, he's curious enough to accept Philip's invitation, "Come and see."

Incidentally, "Come and see," is about the purest and least offensive form of evangelism. Philip doesn't argue or try to sell his friend anything. He just invites Nathanael to see for himself. We know that some people will respond to the invitation to come to church, especially if it's a personal invitation, and they will see nothing that turns them on. But, we also know that others will come and see greater things than they expected.

It's not only newcomers who see greater things. Those of us who've been coming to worship for years always have the potential to see greater things than we've ever seen before because we will see Jesus in new ways and appreciate his benefits afresh.

Let's quickly look at just a few of the different ways we can see Jesus that enable us to see God at work. Philip says Jesus is the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote. Every time we open the pages of the Old Testament, we open another dimension of the ministry of Jesus Christ. It's not just that the writers were longing for the Messiah. Jesus himself studied the scriptures as the guide and inspiration for his life.

Understanding that interaction teaches an appreciation for his role as Rabbi.

That's the way his disciples initially understood their Lord, as their Rabbi. He taught the scriptures, interpreting the word of God, sorting out the love God has for his people from the expectations the people placed on their God. That process of interpretation continues in every generation as we set aside the accretions to faith that may have been useful at one time and bring to the front the essence of faith. The church is like an old coffee pot. Over time the heat causes scale to form and the oils to harden until the essence of the coffee is overpowered by the accumulation of gunk. Unless we do a major cleaning to renew the pot, the coffee taste we love just disappears. Rabbi Jesus is our guide to the real taste of Christianity. A renewed and cleansed church will see and do greater things.

Philip also notes that Jesus is the son of Joseph from Nazareth. That's like saying you're a Dickerson or a Schumann or a Drake. But, it also points to the very real humanity of Jesus. We're all products of our families and our environment. Douglas grew up with a father who was a highly functioning alcoholic. Doug enjoyed alcohol himself until he woke up the day after a party and realized he couldn't remember getting home. By the grace of God, he stopped drinking. Because Jesus knows firsthand our weaknesses and limitations, because he shares our sins and the narrowness of being part of a particular town and ethnicity, he can save us from these limitations. He has overcome the deadly temptations of

human existence. His resurrection promises that we are not forever squeezed into the boxes that define us as middle class, English-speaking, white Americans. We will see greater things, a broader vision, a richer life.

And, speaking of ethnicity, Jesus has the title here as King of Israel. How easily we forget that Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew, part of the chosen people of God. Jewish-Christian relations are inherently tense because we're so closely related. Nonetheless, we have much to learn from Judaism, and Judaism has much to learn from Jesus of Nazareth.

The last two titles given to Jesus in this passage are the most familiar and, for that reason, the most easily overlooked: Son of God and Son of Man. As the Son of God, uniquely the Son of God, the only begotten Son of God, Jesus shares the power and majesty of the Father. We have to acknowledge that using the words "Son" and "Father" presents difficulties for some women who have been abused by men. But, these words do not privilege males over females in any way. Instead they point to the loving intimacy of Jesus' relationship with God. Most important, they point us toward the experience of a loving God who wants to care for us better than any human parent, who will comfort us more gently than any friend, and who will walk with us so that we will see greater things than our troubles.

As Son of Man, Jesus bridges the gap between heaven and earth, between the divine realm where God's

will is supreme and the human realm where God has limited divine power for our sake. We need a go-between, someone who can tell us about the kingdom of God in parables we can understand; someone who has suffered the indignities of our life and shown the way through them. The Son of Man leads the way to a better, greater life.

All kind of changes are coming in our nation, many beyond the ability of anyone to either control or correct them. Some of these changes will be welcome. The best changes in our lives and in the life of the world can be seen only when we see Jesus for who he really is. When we have experienced him as teacher, Lord and King who fulfills more than we can ever understand about the Bible and about God, then our eyes will be able to see the wonders around us.

The colors will be brighter, the gray of winter will look like silver and we will see right through the grime and dirt of humanity into the souls that God loves so well. When that happens, the greatest change of all will be in you and me.