

When You See the Angels

John 1:43-51

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

One of the hardest questions that can be asked about one's religious faith is:
Why do you believe?

Why do you trust in a God you cannot see?

There is, I think, a stubborn unbeliever inside each one of us.

We are like the man in the gospels whose child was sick and who cried out
to Jesus,

“Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.”

Dr. Harold Bosley has written that the price of a great faith is a great and
continuous struggle to get it, to keep it, and to share it.

He writes:

*It is a serious mistake to think of faith as a placid lake under the
bewitching beauty of the full moon. It is much more like the ocean in
storm, the swift current of the full river where one must stay alert for
the dangers that lie ahead. Faith is a fight as well as a peace.*

Sometimes the struggle for faith comes easily to us.

But at other times we struggle to believe in spite of all evidence
to the contrary.

So what keeps bringing us back to faith?

What is the real reason for trusting in God the way we do?

II

In the Gospel of John we find a story that sheds light on this question.

It is the story of a skeptic named Nathanael who meets Jesus and finds a reason to believe.

The story contains two conversations.

The first is between Philip and Nathanael.

In this conversation we hear Nathanael's wrongheaded reasons for not believing.

The other conversation is between Jesus and Nathanael.

What Jesus tells Nathanael brings us back to the beginnings,
to the kindergarten of faith,
to the foundational reason for believing
when there are abundant reasons not to.

Scene One: Philip and Nathanael.

Philip has just met Jesus, and what a meeting it was!

I do not mean that he had a chance to shake hands with the Master in some kind of receiving line—"Glad to see you; what was your name again?"

No, Philip had a deep encounter.

He found himself grasped by the mystery and the authority of Jesus the Messiah.

Nothing would ever be the same for him again.

Philip knew immediately that he had met the One for whom all Israel was waiting.

I am sure he understood very little,
but he did not need to understand.

He believed, and in his faith he was ready to leave everything that was familiar and walk into the totally unfamiliar world of Jesus the Christ.

Like anyone who has just had a life-changing experience,
Philip was burning to tell someone.

So he ran to Nathanael.

“Listen, Nate,” he said, “we have met him; we have seen him; we know who he is—the One we’ve been waiting for—the Messiah. His name is Jesus...he comes from Nazareth.”

Nathanael probably thought Philip had been brainwashed, or was joking.

“Oh...you just met the Messiah?”

From Nazareth, huh?

Nothing good ever comes from there!”

Nathanael was a skeptic.

And yet, we can sympathize with him, can't we?

All he had was a second hand report.

And what he heard was not what any Jew was conditioned to expect about the Messiah

Nazareth was the last place a Jew would expect the Messiah to be from.

A village of several hundred people at that time, Nazareth was never mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures and was not associated with any Messianic expectation.

It was a one stop light town...a “blink-your-eyes-and-you-miss-it” place.

It would be like the savior of the world coming from Bryant or Salamonia.

Imagine someone telling you of having just met a young man who has all the answers to the world's problems.

He has the answer to poverty, world hunger, crime, drug abuse, the economy, ethnic strife, peace in the world.

The catch is, he's just in from a place you least expect—
 a Calcutta slum,
 a Haiti village,
 or some island in the Pacific you've never heard of.

He doesn't speak English too well,
 he's not well educated,
 and he doesn't have a job.

But this is the man of the hour for the nations of the world.

Would you have just a slight temptation to say,
 "Can anything good come out of that place?"

We can understand Nathanael's skepticism, can't we?

Philip does not argue with Nathanael.

He simply says, "Come see for yourself."

So Philip takes Nathanael to Jesus, which leads to our second conversation.

III

Scene Two: Jesus and Nathanael.

Jesus watches Nathanael as he approaches and greets the skeptic with a compliment:

"Here is an Israelite in whom there is no guile."

This was the highest compliment you could pay to a Jew, like saying,

"You are a real Israelite; there's not a false bone in your body; you are true blue through and through."

Nathanael is still skeptical.

No one is going to win him over with flattery.

So he says, "How do you know who I am?"

Jesus says to him:

"I do know you, Nathanael...I know you quite well. I knew you before you came. I knew you before Philip spoke to you. I know the real you."

In the 1998 movie "The Truman Show," when Truman Burbank finally figures out that his whole life is a TV show, and he is trying once and for all to escape from the town of Seahaven, which is, in fact, one giant TV set, Christof, the creator of the show, speaks to him from on high, and says:

I know you better than you know yourself...I've been watching you your whole life. I was watching when you were born. I was watching when you took your first step. I watched you on your first day of school....the episode when you lost your first tooth. You can't leave Truman...you were born on the air.

And of course, Truman does leave to make his own life instead of the one Christof had made for him for 30 years.

Jesus, of course, is not Christof,
 he is Christ, the Word made flesh,
 and he is not trying to manipulate Nathanael the way Christof
 manipulated Truman for the world's amusement.

Jesus offers Nathanael not an artificial, made-for-TV world,
 but the real world of unconditional love, grace, and acceptance.

Nathanael is stunned.

His skepticism melts like snow in Death Valley.

It's a miracle.

He doesn't know what to say.

He can only confess his faith:

“I believe...I believe you are the Son of God...the King of Israel.”

It was instant conversion: from skeptic to believer in ten seconds.

IV

Nathanael grabbed hold of the first reason for believing that came along.

Jesus doesn't question his faith.

Simple though it may be, it is real enough for Jesus.

Faith is faith, and even if you do not have the most convincing reasons for believing, you can still believe.

And your faith can be a power for the transformation of your life.

But Jesus knows that Nathanael has a reason for believing yet to be discovered.

One day he will actually experience the real reason.

*“You believe because of what I've told you about yourself...
You will see something greater even than that.”*

What happens to Nathanael happens to all of us.

We do things for reasons that we consider sound at the time,
only to discover later that the real reason went a lot deeper.

Half of our struggle in growing up is coming to terms with the real reason we have for doing the things we do.

The same is true in our spiritual growth.

It takes time and it takes growth to uncover the real reason we have,
even for the basics,

even for believing.

Our hearts have reasons that our heads can't know—at first.

Jesus understood this about Nathanael...and about us.

He said to Nathanael—

One day, later on, further down the road of your experience,
you will learn the real reason for believing in me.

You have a reason—this miracle you think you saw.

But there is something deeper—and this is how it will come to you:

You will see heaven opened up
and you will see the angels coming down
and going up from the Son of Man.

When you see the angels, Nathanael, you'll know why you believe.

When you see the angels...

V

Perhaps you are aware that Jesus is here alluding to a famous OT story—the story of Jacob and the ladder, from Genesis 28.

Jacob, who had tricked his brother Esau out of his inheritance, was running for his life

But while escaping his brother, Jacob was captured by God.

He stopped for the night at a desert water hole,
and there had a profound experience of the Divine.

He dreamed of a ladder pitched between heaven and earth,
and he saw angels going up and down the ladder.

Since it was a dream, we don't have to worry about how heaven can really be “up” or why angels would even need a ladder.

The ladder was a sign to Jacob that God was with him and had called him.

In the morning Jacob built an altar and named the place Bethel, “house of God.”

So Jesus tells Nathanael that he would know what his real reason for believing was when he had an experience like Jacob’s—
an experience of being captured by the grace of God.

When you see the angels, Nathanael, you’ll know why you believe.

VI

There are many reasons for believing.

Some believe because they grew up in a believing family—they have always sensed God’s presence.

Some believe because of the church, and their faith was conceived in the womb of the body of Christ.

St. Augustine said, “I would never have believed had it not been for the church.”

(Some don’t believe because of the church—
but that’s a sermon for another day.)

Some believe because they are persuaded by all those arguments that try to prove that God exists and that Jesus is who he said he is.

Some believe because of the Bible...
finding in its pages solid reasons for faith
and because in the pages of the Bible they meet Jesus.

(Some also don’t believe because of the Bible—
but that’s also a sermon for another day.)

These are all good reasons for believing,
but what is the real reason?

Why do you believe?

Jesus tells Nathanael there is only one reason.

“From now on you will see heaven opened and the angels coming down from heaven upon the Son of man, and when you see them you will know the real reason you believe in me.”

The word “you” in verse 51 is second person plural, indicating that Jesus is talking to a wider audience than just Nathanael.

Jesus is in fact talking to you and me and reminding us that the reason we can believe in God,
 despite all evidence to the contrary,
 is that our lives have been captured by the grace of God.

That is what Jacob discovered.

He was running away from the source of love...
 running away from grace.

But he could not escape.

God is too persistent in love...
 too stubborn in grace.

When Jacob was caught, he discovered that the one chasing him was not his enemy, but his dearest friend.

That is the meaning of Jacob’s dream and of Jesus’ words to Nathanael.

Jesus is the ultimate ladder stretching between heaven and earth.

Jesus is the point of contact between the finite and the infinite.

Time and eternity intersect in him.

Through Jesus the doorway between heaven and earth is wide open,
 as God reaches down for sorry earth and sinful people.

In Jesus the blessings of heaven have now come down to earth...

and the sorrows of earth can now be carried up to heaven.

Jesus told Nathanael, that he, like Jacob, would see the angels.

Not literal angels and certainly not angels going up and down a ladder—
angels really don't need a ladder, do they?

Jesus was not talking about what we see with our physical eyes.

Jesus meant that he is Jacob's ladder...he is the stairway to heaven.

Through the intimacy of relationship that we have with Jesus we have an
ongoing experience with God,

the Hound of Heaven,
who pursues us with grace
and captures us with love.

VII

Where in your life have you seen Jacob's ladder?

Not at Bethel or Bethsaida or in the desert of Judea,
but right here in Portland...

in your home,
your workplace,
your classroom,
with family, friends, neighbors.

The poet Francis Thompson wrote:

*But, when so sad thou canst not sadder,
Cry—and upon thy so sore loss,
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.*

Can you now begin to understand the message Jesus had for Nathanael...
the message he has for you?

The real reason you keep believing,
in the midst of your sadness,
and in spite of your doubts,

is that you have seen the traffic of Jacob's ladder
pitched between heaven and the place of your troubles.

Jesus, who hung on a cross pitched between heaven and earth,
sends us angels when we least expect them.

Maybe your angel was a friend who listened to you in a time of need.

Maybe your angel was a stranger who appeared out of nowhere
to give you the help you needed at that moment.

Maybe your angel was a beloved teacher or pastor
who encouraged you to continue on
and do what you did not think you could do.

Maybe your angel was that sense of divine strength and peace
that came to you in a hospital room as you awaited surgery.

Maybe your angel was the comforting presence you felt in a time of
grief and loss.

Jesus, the stairway to heaven, comes to us through the angels...
with a pungent taste of pardon when we go wrong,
with a quiet nudge of strength when we feel helpless,
with subtle hint of hope when we lose courage.

Do you believe?

May God help your unbelief.

And may God give you the eyes of faith
to see the angels going back and forth
between heaven and earth.

Amen.