

JJ¹

Remember when you were a child and everything seemed so far away—Christmas, birthdays, summer vacation, Green Bay, the end of the school day, the end of your “time-out” in the corner. As you get older time keeps going faster and faster, but then different things seem far away—paying off the car or mortgage, retirement, when the kids come home again, heaven. Sometimes God even seems far away. But today along with Nathanael we are reminded that God is **NOT SO FAR AWAY.**

In last week’s Gospel we heard the account of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River. Right after Jesus was baptized he was sent into the wilderness of Judea to be tempted by the devil for 40 days and nights. After his victory over the devil, Jesus returned to the area of the Jordan River where John the Baptist was ministering.

After calling Andrew, John and Peter to be his disciples, Jesus decided it was time to go back to Galilee. Before he leaves he still has two more men to find and make his disciples. He finds Philip and simply says, “Follow me.” And he followed Jesus. Philip went to go find one of his dear friends, Nathanael. Filled with excitement he finds Nathanael sitting under a fig tree meditating and says, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in

the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph!”

You’d think he’d be overjoyed, but instead, Nathanael responds, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” By what Nathanael says here and what Jesus would soon say about him, we see that Nathanael was a student of the Scriptures and a faithful believer. He knows that the Messiah is supposed to come from the city of David, Bethlehem, not Nazareth.

Being from Cana just a few miles away, Nathanael knew that Nazareth was just a little podunk town—a town so insignificant that it wasn’t even mentioned in the Old Testament Scriptures. In his mind, nothing significant for his eternal salvation could ever come from Nazareth. For Nathanael the Messiah was still a long way off. His Savior was still far away and he wasn’t going to waste his time chasing after someone from Nazareth.

But isn’t this so often the reaction of this world? When you tell people that the world’s Savior has come and you invite them to “come and see” you often hear things like, “Why would I want to waste my time by going to church? It’s the weekend. It’s a morning to sleep in! Anyways, what good has God done for me lately?” To them, God is far away.

¹ JJ is the acronym for *Jesus Juve*, which is Latin for “Jesus Help”. It is a short prayer used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the beginning of their work.

Still others might say, "If there is a God, where's he been? You say he's a God of love but where was he to save all those people in all these earthquakes, hurricanes, fires and floods? Where is he putting a stop to all this violence in the world? If there is a God he's far away and doesn't care about us."

But it doesn't take much for you to start thinking that God is far away either. Maybe you've been asking and asking God for something, even something God gives, but he hasn't given it to you. Maybe you've been asking for years and you've begun to wonder, "God, where are you? Did you forget about me?" Some of you have lost a spouse. Some of you have lost children. How many times have you found yourself thinking that God was so far away and that he doesn't know what this loss has done to you?

Sometimes you can even begin to think that God is far away when everything is going fine in your life. Days go on just the same as always and you slowly start to think that you don't really need God and are fine taking care of yourself. And what's worse is when you stop relying on God for your physical needs you've probably already begun to neglect your spiritual needs. "Ah, it's snowing today.

Better stay home and shovel." "The kids were up late last night, we can go to church next week." "We just don't have time for those midweek services." "I had enough learning in Catechism, I have no need for Bible class." "Personal Bible study, that's just for pastors and teachers. They need to do that." And before you know it, you're the ones walking away from God, not him from you!

Whether it's your own arrogance or hardships you endure, sometimes God doesn't always seem so close. Sometimes you might feel like Nathanael did, thinking that God was still far away. But as Nathanael quickly learned, you too are shown that God is **NOT SO FAR AWAY.**



Nathanael was reluctant, but because his dear friend Philip said, "Come and see," Nathanael went along. When Jesus saw Nathanael coming Jesus announced to those around him, "Truly here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Jesus was saying that Nathanael wasn't just an Israelite by blood, but that he was also an Israelite in faith. Jesus could see into Nathanael's heart and see a heart that longed for the coming Messiah. Jesus could see a heart that was not divided, saying one thing and doing another. Jesus could see a heart devoted to the

Jesus could see a heart devoted to the Lord.

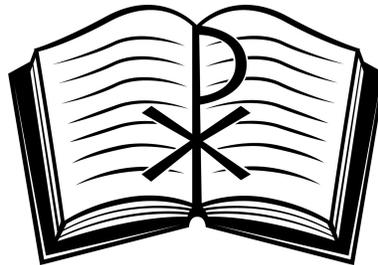
Nathanael is shocked to hear Jesus say this and asks, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered, "Before Philip called you, while you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" God was **NOT SO FAR AWAY** after all!

Friends, consider that by God's grace through faith you too are true Israelites! And this only because God has come very near to you and continues to be with you every day of your lives! Just as Jesus knew Nathanael before he ever met him, he has also known you from eternity. He knows you better than you know yourself! He knows who and what you are by nature and that is the very reason why he came into this world in the first place. He came to shed his blood for all your sins—for all the times you have foolishly thought he was far away and for all the times you have arrogantly walked away from him, relying on yourself.

But he not only came into this world and made it his home for about 33 years, he has also come into your heart to make it his home for all eternity! God is certainly not far away but is with you every day! Remember, this is the one who promised

his disciples just moments before he ascended into heaven, "And surely I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20).

Because Jesus is not far away but very near to you, even living in you through faith, you are able to confess every day along with Nathanael, "You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" And because this confession is your confession you also receive the same promise from Jesus who said, "Amen, Amen, I tell you: You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."



When Jesus makes this promise he reveals that he is the fulfillment of Jacob's dream at the well when he saw the ladder reaching from heaven to earth. Jesus is the world's connection to God and his grace. Jesus is the one who opens the way to heaven. We see this now through the eyes of faith, but one day we will see it with our own eyes when we die and the Lord's angels come to bring us home to heaven.

And friends, it is this same Jesus who invites you to share in Philip's simple ministry that others would see Jesus too. Notice how far a relationship can go in bringing others to Jesus. Nathanael didn't go for the right reason. Most people rarely do. Nathanael basically went to appease his good friend whom

he obviously thought got caught up in another false alarm. Philip, on the other hand, knew that the only way to combat his friend's doubt and cynicism was to encourage him to encounter Christ.

Friends, you have the same simple and yet all important mission today too. You don't have to be ready with an answer to every question they might have. You don't have to convince them that Jesus is real and important for their lives before you invite them. Simply do what Philip did. Simply invite them. Simply say, "Come and see!" so that they would encounter the only thing that is going to convince them of the truth—the Word of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then they, along with you, will see that God is indeed **NOT SO FAR AWAY** at all. Amen.

SDG²

² SDG is an acronym for *Soli Deo Gloria*, which is Latin for "To God Alone Be The Glory". This is a statement of humility used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the end of their work to let themselves and others know that it isn't about getting glory for themselves, but about giving all glory to God.

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