

43 The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, “Follow me.”

44 Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. **45** Philip found Nathanael and told him, “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.”

46 “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked.

“Come and see,” said Philip.

47 When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”

48 “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

49 Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”

50 Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.” **51** He then added, “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.”

Duped

P.T. Barnum of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus is quoted as saying, “There is a sucker born every minute.” Although he loved playing pranks on his audience, he never referred his audience as suckers. That came later when Barnum wanted to purchase a supposed giant known as the Cardiff Giant discovered in the backyard of William Newell. So he offered \$50,000 for the fossil. When his offer was rejected rather than up the ante he decided to make his own and advertise it as “authentic,” and the original a fake. Thousands flocked to Barnum’s fossil.

In the meantime a defamation lawsuit was in the works by a banker David Hannum, who had invested heavily in the Cardiff Giant, and openly proclaimed his disbelief that anyone would flock to such foolishness, after all he had the only one, the original, and so yes, “A sucker is born every minute,” they went to Barnum’s attraction.

Nathanael seems a lot like David, the one who proclaimed, “A sucker is born every minute.” Especially when Philip comes with news of giant proportions, “*We’ve found the Messiah!*” In response to Philip’s excitement he dashes his hopes with, “*Can anything good come from Nazareth?*” It seems that he assumes Jesus is just another huckster searching for suckers. He’s seen this before and he isn’t buying it. But what he doesn’t realize is that like unlike David, his confidence isn’t founded on a cleverly invented forgery.

That's the way Jesus finds skeptics and cynics. After all there are so many so called Christians out there who fleece the flock and dupe individuals out of money. Like a recent heretic who purchased a \$36 million private jet so he doesn't have to rub elbows in a long tube of demons. Or like another church selling forgiveness on a slip of paper. A sucker is born every minute. And yet Jesus still comes for the suckers and the skeptics alike, holding hucksters accountable while forgiving those who have fooled themselves or others.

Jesus came and first found Philip. Philip then ran off to find his friend Nathanael when he reports, "*We've found the Messiah!*" Nathanael isn't a fool, maybe he remembers that Philip was voted least likely to succeed in school. "I can't believe you fell for that." He's a skeptic and that's okay. It's a good thing to examine the evidence and not just buy ocean front property from Arizona. There were multiple false Christs in the first century. The New Testament records three of them: Theudas, Judah the Galilean, and an unnamed Egyptian Jew. Two are mentioned in Acts 5 in passing. Josephus records that Judah convinced, "*The majority of the masses to take up their possessions and to follow him to the Jordan River.*" He claimed that the Jordan would part for them at his command. It didn't and many of his followers paid for their foolishness with their lives. The unnamed Egyptian Jew stirred up a revolt and led four thousand men out into the desert. His men were killed in an ensuing battle. Nathanael knows that not everyone who claims to be someone special is someone. He knows enough not to drink the cool-aid.

So why would he buy into this one? Especially since he knows scripture and Nazareth isn't mentioned in the prophets. But before he can find Jesus, Jesus finds him and greets him, "*Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.*" Jesus is either being sarcastic or serious? This is a compliment or satire. Is Jesus saying Nathanael's filters don't work and he blurts whatever is on his mind? Or, "Here there is no deception, duplicity, or deceit at all, in all Israel... here is one who stands as righteous on his own. Certainly he will recognize the Messiah when he comes." Nathanael is the very model of what God expects his people to be. We know Nathanael is not perfect even if he proclaims to be and so he responds, "*How do you know me?*" Jesus answers, "*I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.*"

And suddenly Nathanael jumps on the Jesus bandwagon, "*Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.*" Jesus then turns skeptic and questions, "*You believe because of this?*" *You'll see greater things than that. I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man.*" In John's Gospel seeing isn't believing. Instead John proclaims, "*These words are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, that you might have life in his name*" (John 20:31). Faith comes

from hearing the message and the Holy Spirit working through that word. Not clever sounding arguments. No, Nathanael... you have no idea what that means. You don't even know who Jesus is or where he is from.

It's good to be a skeptic. It's good to investigate and even question when something sounds too good to be true. I don't want to be a just another sucker who is taken advantage of. That's why I caution visitors when it comes to giving offering. Make sure you know what the church teaches before deciding it's something you want to support. I don't have in mind to buy a private jet but it is called stewardship, taking care of the goods and gifts that God has entrusted to you in this world.

But that doesn't mean everyone is beyond hope and there is no truth either. Jesus came. Nathanael rejected him. Can anything good come from Nazareth? We might ponder, "Can anything good from God's church, his people?" With so many bad examples many may doubt it. Moreover with so much scientific evidence and poor scholarship claiming, "Jesus never existed." Every year documentaries state, "Well we don't know that Jesus even existed." But we have more documentation on Jesus than anybody in the ancient world. There is no question in mind whether or not Jesus existed. But to ignore the evidence because it doesn't fit our findings is like Nathanael ignoring Jesus because he's from Nazareth and well... I didn't read about Nazareth in the Old Testament. It's a poor excuse.

The problem is that we are often skeptical of everything with the exception of ourselves. May be convinced, "I'm pretty good," or "At the very least I'm better than some people." Rather than confess sin, we often do what we can and pretend it never happened, hide it deep out of sight and hope nobody ever finds out. We think we can get away with ignoring God's instruction. In so doing we deceive ourselves. We think we are something when we are not. We think we will get away with it but God knows all and sees all. *"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."* Like David Hannum, we too are taken in by - the Devil - that great deceiver. The father of lies. We're only fooling ourselves.

Even worse is when we doubt the forgiveness freely given to us and think it can't be so easy. We find the Messiah right here in his Word. Right where he says he will be found. And that is right where we find the promise, *"You will see greater things than that."* You ain't seen nothing yet. *"You will see heaven opened and the messengers of God ascending and descending on the son of man."* Jesus references Genesis 28.

Jesus points to a low point in the life of Jacob. He tricked his brother into trading a bowl of soup for the birthright. The trickster then dressed up as his brother and duped his dad. He had

to flee because the dupe didn't think things through. He's in the desert, not a place to lay his head when he has a dream of angels ascending and descending. Jacob's ladder. God reaffirmed his promise in spite of his many an multiple failures and forgives him.

Jesus compares Nathanael to Jacob - a true Israelite in whom there is much deceit. Jesus knew what he had done below that fig tree even if he intended to hide it. Jesus was well aware of every bit of sin even if he was able to fool his friends he could not fool God. He didn't need to because Jesus came in spite of his failings, he came to seek and to save the lost. Here he not only saves but he calls Nathanael "*Come, follow me.*" He calls him to not believe because he has seen but because of what he will soon hear concerning Jesus.

They didn't understand. It wouldn't be until after John 20 when Jesus went to his disciples who were hiding in an upper room and brought them a message of peace and forgiveness.

That is good news because Jesus has made Nathanael a true Israelite in whom there is nothing false. He has done the same for us. He knows our cynicism. He knows our doubts. He comes in search of us and he forgives every single one.

Compared to Jacob - we are those in whom there is much deceit. But he calls to us in our baptism. He places his name on us and calls us to believe not because of the signs, miracles, or wonder, not because of what we see but because of what we hear in his Word. In his Word he calls you by name. He has made you his own. *These words are written that you may believe... not in yourself but in the one who lived and died for you, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.*

You can rejoice over that. Moreover you can follow Jesus and live a life worthy of your calling. That's the point of Epiphany. Jesus calls us to follow him where he goes, we see him live the perfect life we never could and then die a death we deserve. We take up our cross, which is far less than the one he carried, and we follow Jesus. There are no threats of hell. There is a promise, a message for us as John shifts from singular to plural and applies Jesus' words not only to Nathanael but also to us. "*You will see the heavens opened and God's messengers ascending and descending on the Son of Man.*" Heaven is open. God's messengers continue to proclaim the way to God, the ladder, the cross. Jesus, who became man so he could find us, who invites us, "Come, follow me."

A sucker is born every minute. The irony is that the banker would later find out the Cardiff Giant was an elaborate hoax, he too was just another sucker who was fooled himself. While a sucker is born every day, God continues to call, gather, and enlighten his church on

earth and keep her in the one true faith. Pointing people not back to themselves and what they have done but back to Jesus and his work for us. Amen.