

Hespeler, 17 January, 2021 © Scott McAndless

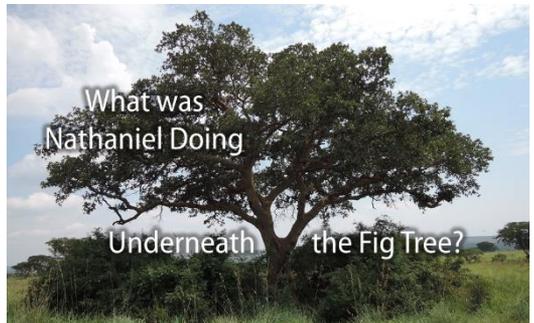
1 Samuel 3:1-20, Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18, 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, John 1:43-51

I really just have one question as I read our passage this morning from the Gospel of John. What on earth was Nathaniel doing underneath that fig tree? Because, whatever it was, it seems to have been really important. The simple fact that Jesus saw Nathaniel under there and was apparently able to deduce something essential about Nathaniel's character from what he saw simply blew Nathaniel away. It led him to make one of the most extraordinary confessions about who Jesus was that you will find in all the gospels as he declared that Jesus was both the Son of God and the King of Israel!

But even more than Nathaniel's response, I'm very curious about what it was that Jesus saw in what Nathaniel was doing because, whatever it was, it revealed to him that Nathaniel was, **"truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"** The word that is translated as deceit there, also has a sense of cunningness and wiliness. It doesn't merely mean a tendency to lie, but also a tendency to manipulate the truth in a self-serving way. The old King James Version translated this verse as, **"an Israelite in whom there is no guile,"** and that was also a pretty good translation, or at least it would be if people still used words like *guile*.

Now let me tell you something, I am getting a little bit tired of guile and deceit. I'm getting tired of those who use guile in order to hold onto their power or their wealth. I'm getting tired of leaders who seem to have decided that the people's perception of the truth is far more important than what the actual truth is. I'm getting tired of political leaders who are like Eli in our Old Testament reading this morning, who knows very well that the people underneath them are breaking the rules – are taking the trips that no one else is allowed to take or are profiting from their positions – and yet are content to put forward a convenient fiction that they were simply not aware. I'm tired of promises that people make and have no intention whatsoever to fulfill. We seem to be living in a world where guile and deceit have been elevated to a science and I am getting very tired of that.

So wouldn't it be really helpful if we could just have a way of looking at someone while they sat underneath a fig tree and be able to know just from that that here is a person in whom there is absolutely no guile or deceit? Why, instead of carrying out job interviews or political debates, we could just make people sit under the tree for a little bit and we could all just know that here was somebody who had integrity and complete honesty. Just think of the incredible benefit of such a straightforward test!



Now, some people might say that that could not work for ordinary people. I mean, sure, *Jesus* might have been able to discern something about the character of Nathaniel by seeing him under a fig tree, but that's Jesus. Jesus, as Nathaniel himself confesses, is the very Son of God! Surely Jesus can see things that other mere human beings cannot. But Jesus himself says that it is not extraordinary that he saw this, which suggests that it really was something that was visible to anybody.

So what was Nathaniel doing under that tree? We have one possibility that comes to us from the traditions of rabbinic Judaism which developed strong traditions around the study of the Torah, that is to say of the law in what we would call the Old Testament. In rabbinic Judaism, there is a strong tradition of people (traditionally men) gathering to discuss the Torah. They will read the scriptures and then get into these extended discussions and arguments about the meaning and the application of various passages.

These sorts of discussions are famously contentious, so much so that it became a proverb that when you have two Jews you will have three opinions. But this is not seen as a negative thing, it is seen as a way of people engaging with the text and wrestling with that variety of opinions. And it is believed that deeper truth is always found by engaging in that kind of contentious discussion. What's more, it is seen as a great blessing to be able to engage in such an activity, as Tevye sings in *Fiddler on the Roof*:

*"If I were rich, I'd have the time that I lack To sit in the synagogue and pray. And maybe have a seat by the Eastern wall.*

*"And I'd discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day. That would be the sweetest thing of all."*

So this way of studying the Torah is a longstanding beloved Jewish tradition and apparently, back in the Middle Ages, this activity was sometimes referred to using an odd phrase. It was called sitting underneath the fig tree. And so it has been suggested by some that that is what Nathaniel was doing, studying the Torah, when Jesus saw him. And there is something to be said for such an interpretation. That would be the kind of activity that might just indicate something about Nathaniel's character.

But there is just one problem. There are no indications that this kind of activity was a part of common Jewish life in the time of Jesus. The study of the Torah became much more popularly and widely practiced only after the temple was destroyed in 70 AD. While the temple still existed, the focus of Jewish life was on that instead of on the scriptures which few could read (as literacy was very low) and even fewer could possibly obtain a copy. So it's unlikely that Nathaniel was engaging in that specific activity, at least not as it later came to be practiced.

But I still think there might be a connection to that. Where, after all, did that figure of speech – speaking of studying the Torah as sitting under a fig tree – come from? It must come from the Scriptures themselves, specifically from a

promise that is repeated a few times in the Old Testament. The promise goes like this: **“They shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.”** (Micah 4:4) In many ways, that is one of the key promises of the Old Testament. It envisions a nation where every family has its own little piece of land with the iconic fruit trees that are common in that part of the world. It envisions an agricultural society where everybody has the basics of survival.

I know that might not quite sound like a utopia to us – we would probably look for a bit more than just the basics, but I guess that just shows you how tough life could be back then if their big dream was just to be able to have their own vine and fig tree. You know how we sometimes talk about the American dream, well that was kind of the Israelite dream. And apparently, as a part of that, their big dream for a bit of leisure time was to be able to sit down underneath their own fig trees for a while.

And that’s why it later became an expression for discussing the Torah. When, in later ages, Jewish men became prosperous enough to have a little bit of leisure time they, like Tevye, decided that the very best way to use that time was to spend it discussing the Torah. But, like I say, that was all in the future. What might it have looked like in Jesus’ day when literacy was rare and Torah scrolls even rarer?

I would suggest that, before people had to argue over the written words of the Torah, they just struggled with living it. In Nathaniel’s day that most basic Israelite dream of every Israelite family having a fig tree and a vine to live under had become way out of reach for huge numbers of people. People had lost their family farms and vines and fig trees. Huge numbers in the population were consigned to living as slaves or just getting by working as day labourers. But maybe what Jesus had seen in Nathaniel was that he was trying to keep that ancient Israelite dream alive.

It’s kind of interesting that Jesus refers to Nathaniel as an Israelite. Do you realize that that word is rarely used in the New Testament? It had become out of date, kind of like the dream of everyone having their own vine and fig tree had gone out of date, in Jesus’ day and the normal word that would have been used was *Judean* or *Galilean* – which is to say that they had begun to call themselves what the Romans called them. But Jesus sees Nathaniel as an *Israelite* sitting underneath a fig tree.

Nathaniel, I suspect, has been doing what he can to keep that dream alive. He has been reminding people of God’s promise – that **“They shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.”** And clearly Nathaniel has not just been looking out for himself and his own fig tree, he has been shouting to all who will listen that it is God’s intention and plan that every family should be able to have that. He has been demanding what God has been demanding and he has been demanding it for everyone.

Nathaniel was clearly someone who didn't hesitate to say what was on his mind. When Philip told him, **“We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”**

Nathanael came right back with, **“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”** Those are not the words of somebody who lets the worry that they might offend somebody get in the way of speaking his mind! So when he saw all of the ways in which the nation no longer functioned as God had intended, you can bet that Nathaniel didn't stop to calculate how dangerous it might be for him to speak up about that.

That is what Jesus saw – that is what he was referring to when he said that he saw Nathaniel underneath the fig tree. But, if we understand that, are we any closer to finding the secret method to discover the individuals among us – maybe especially the leaders and potential leaders – who are without guile and deceit?

Well, it likely never is going to be easy to discern. The human heart has ever been creative at finding new ways to deceive, but I believe that one thing we can do is be on the lookout for people who remind us of this character of Nathaniel in this passage. We need, first of all, someone who believes in the promises of God – that is to say, someone who has not given into the cynicism of this world, who has not stopped believing that, even if it seems unlikely right now, there will be vines and fig trees for all, that God can make it happen. We need that kind of faith.

And we also need Nathaniels who are not in it just for themselves – not just for their own fig tree but who are willing to hold out for the whole community to have what they need to survive. Oh, how much we are in need of that these days!

And, yes, we need Nathaniels who are not afraid to speak up and share the truth as they see it – even if it is the truth about Nazareth that no one wants to hear – no matter what it might cost.

We need Nathaniels and the truth of the matter is that we can't really wait for one to show up. We need to be looking for them underneath the fig trees of this world, which means we need to start spending time under those fig trees ourselves. That is why Jesus found a kindred spirit in Nathaniel, he was doing the same thing. To find Nathaniel, we need to be Nathaniel.