

Being Known

Psalm 139:1-6; 13-18

John 1:43-51

These last verses in John 1 contain an extended, if hidden, allusion to an episode in the Patriarch Jacob's life. In Genesis 28 we read of a young Jacob—not even married yet—having a dream in which he sees angels ascending to, and descending from, heaven on a ladder. (This, not the string game, is the origin of the phrase, “Jacob's ladder”.) As vivid as the image of angels on a ladder may be, the true importance of this episode is that the dream turns out to be the introduction to God's blessing of Jacob. The very next thing to happen is God's making of a covenant with Jacob. He will inherit the land that would become Israel. He will have descendants too numerous to count. And then Jacob wakes up. It was all a dream, but a dream that came true.

At the close of the first chapter of John, Jesus, embarked on his disciple recruitment drive, has this striking conversation with Nathaniel. Philip, already on board, tells Nathaniel they've found the promised Messiah, calling him “Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth”. Nathaniel blurts out, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” He comes from Cana, a neighboring, smaller town. We can probably best understand his attitude by thinking of the smaller high schools in this area getting ready to play basketball against Terre Haute North or South. The big schools always seem to have bigger—and better—players. The smaller schools' players play harder

against them, hoping for the upset that would make their careers. Philip understands; he just tells Nathaniel to come.

Jesus sees him coming. In fact, Jesus has seen him before he comes into view. Nathaniel is so impressed he immediately drops his skepticism and becomes the first disciple to call Jesus the Son of God. Jesus in turn tells him he, “will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” He will see the fulfillment of Jacob's dream. He will see God's covenant enfleshed. In Jesus, he will see the final and greatest of all the covenant blessings, salvation itself, happen in real time.

Note that while Nathaniel calls Jesus the “Son of God”, Jesus calls himself the “Son of man”. Both phrasings come from the prophets and mean essentially the same thing. Son of God emphasizes the Messiah's divine nature, his “godness”. Son of man emphasizes his human nature, his identity as the son of Mary. Taken all together, this episode tells us that Jesus comes as the one whom God had promised centuries before. He has supernatural powers. He sees us before we come into his sight. He knows us better than we know ourselves. Remember that “being known” has a rich and complicated meaning in Hebrew thought. Its most basic definition indicates a much more intimate, more thorough relationship than we normally mean when we say, “I know so-and-so”. When Nathaniel asks Jesus, “When did you get to know me?”, he infers a deeper question. “When did you come to see into my soul?” might come closer to his thinking. Jesus understands exactly what he asks. And he does not blink

at the implications. His tone suggests that he does indeed see into Nathaniel's soul.

In Psalm 139 the poet writes, "O Lord, you have searched me and know me." We now know what he means by "know". He means, "You **know** my every thought and move. You **know** what I will say before I say it. You surround me. You "knit me together in my mother's womb." God **knows** us long before we are born. God **knows** how long we will live. As the poet writes, "I come to the end—I am still with you." God knows us. God sees into our souls just as surely as Jesus saw into Nathaniel's. And as so often happens with biblical insights, learning about God's knowledge of us comes as both a blessing and a curse.

The curse first. I can recall two awful spiritual moments in my childhood. One came when I first realized that I would die. The other came later, when I began to realize that God could see **everything** I did, or even dreamed or thought. I have come to terms with the former realization. I am at peace with dying. I have in no way gotten the slightest bit more comfortable with God's knowledge of me. I suspect I am no better nor worse than most of us. But I am a sinner. In the words of the old Presbyterian formulation, I sin against God "in thought, word and deed". We all do. We must therefore all share the same sense of unsettling, frightening dis-ease. In some periods of church history this spiritual fear was the dominant theme of all preaching and teaching. Even today it saturates the messaging in certain branches of the Christian tree. As for our branch, while I do not think spiritual fear should be our primary message (we will, after all, get to the blessings part in a few moments), it

probably ought to occupy a more prominent place.

Years after they both retired, Larry Bird and Magic Johnson learned that each of them had put up a poster of the other in his own home gym. Each of them used that poster as motivation. Each of them feared that the other might work harder in the off-season and gain an edge. Each of them hated losing to the other more than practically anything else in life. Looking at those posters made each of them more diligent in training. What poster might we put up, and where, to remind ourselves that God is watching? How might we use that fear to help us grow in our walk with Christ? We need not wallow in that fear (blessings, remember); we need, instead to use it to motivate ourselves. God knows us. Let us train harder in response. Let us observe the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study, worship, service and the like. And let us manifest the gifts of the Spirit: peace, patience, discernment and the like.

By so doing we turn the “curse” of God's knowledge of us into a blessing. Yet God already blesses us by knowing us no matter how we react. Jesus repeatedly told people he came to save the lost. Though we would be lost without him we need not fear, because he is with us. Just as surely as he came to Philip and Nathaniel, so he came for all who call upon his name. A woman once told me she struggled to pray but not for the reasons she heard other people use. She had no problem staying on-task, she could concentrate in prayer. She had no doubt that God exists, she could speak to God confident that God could hear her. “But that's the problem,” she said. “I know God hears me. I know God sees me. I know God **knows** me and it scares the living

h*^% out of me.” She told me she almost wished she had never left the Roman Catholic church of her girlhood. She found it much easier to confess her sins to a priest than to God.

Yet God's knowledge of us includes God's sympathy with us. God's empathy with us. God's love for us—warts and all. The blessing of Jesus' knowing us comes in large part because he is the Son of man. He shares our human nature with us. God chooses to enter into relationship with us **because** God knows we need that connection. Groucho Marx once said, “I would never join a club that would have me for a member.” Jesus knowingly joined our club. And knowing us, individually and collectively, Jesus will show us heaven. In the end, the greatest blessing is that no matter how nasty, how selfish, how angry, how whatever we get, Jesus knows us and loves us. Jesus blesses us.

In a speech to the National Press Club the respected center-right columnist Peggy Noonan called this, “the most tribal period of my life—perhaps in our nation's history.” She described how we have descended into the very factions our nation's founders feared so greatly. We do not listen to other tribes. At best we dislike the people in them. At worst we hate them. We ascribe sinful motives to their every expression and act. Alas, we Christians fare no better in imitating Jesus in this way than in any other. A discussion in a virtual meeting of pastors recently degraded into a sharp argument about the different choices their churches have made about worshiping in person during the pandemic. Being pastors, we immediately felt guilty

about how badly we had behaved and the peacemakers among us got to work. We ended the meeting with at least a partially reconciled community. But those tribes had poked their horrible heads out from their hidey-holes.

God knows us. The good, the bad, the ugly, God knows us. And God **loves** us. As followers of Jesus of Nazareth, of ultimate goodness, let us strive to know and love one another. No, even more, let us strive to know and love all God's children.

If your tribe's chief lost the last presidential election, imitate Christ by gaining in knowledge of, and love for, the other tribe. The same goes for if your tribe's chief won.

If your tribe screams on social and broadcast media that the other tribe must be silenced, imitate Christ by saying, "On the contrary, I want to hear what they have to say. Maybe I'll learn to love them if I can understand why they think the way they do."

If your tribe insists on masks and social distancing, imitate Christ by respecting the choices of others. The same goes for if your tribe insists on personal freedom no matter what the cost. We need not dance the tango with maskless people, nor run as far and as fast as we can from every breathing human. We need instead to see them as fellow sinners, children of God as we are.

God knows us. God loves us. Jesus sees us coming and going. Jesus came to save us from ourselves. In response, let us know—and even love—one another.