

“Known”  
John 1:43-51  
Sunday, January 14, 2018  
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

**Opening.**

In today’s reading from John, Philip excitedly goes in search of his friend, Nathanael, to tell him about this new teacher, Jesus. He just has to meet him! Jesus means so much to him that he can’t wait to tell his good friend, Nathanael. But what is Nathanael doing?

**I. Under the fig tree.**

Nathanael is sitting under a fig tree. Now I wonder, why is he sitting there? Certainly, he’s escaping the hot sun, finding himself a bit of shade. But what is he thinking about as he sits under that tree? He could be calm and peaceful, meditating serenely. Maybe he’s in deep depression, at the end of his rope, collapsed under that tree in utter despair. Perhaps he’s looking for others to join him under the tree for theological debate or biblical discussion. Or maybe he has no idea why he is sitting under that tree. He just knows that something’s missing.

Sitting under that fig tree, whether he knows it or not, Nathanael is seeking after God. He’s longing for God. There’s something missing in his life. He wants to know God better.

We might describe ourselves this morning as sitting under the fig tree. We’ve come for a variety of reasons – protection from the elements, escape from the noise and busyness of the outside world. Some of us are depressed or in despair. Some of us are looking for theological insight or spiritual awakening. All of us, whether we know it or not, are seeking after God. We have a need and a desire to know God better.

But Nathanael asks the prior question: “How do you know me?” Before we even have an inkling of a beginning desire to know God better, God already knows us. How does God know us? This is Nathanael’s question when he meets Jesus.

## **II. How do you know me? (v. 48, CEB)**

I remember as a young teenage girl in Clare, Michigan, having a favorite tree in the woods behind our house. We lived in the country, about 5 miles out of town, next to a river and across the dirt road from a cow pasture. I would often go out to visit my favorite tree in the woods. Not this time of year, usually. Oh, I might take a quick winter walk out and back; good exercise, each step making a deep hole in the snow. It was slow going.

But in the spring and the summer I'd spend hours out at my tree. It had a large L-shaped branch that hung out over the river and made a place where I could sit and lean against the tree, watching the sun sparkle on the water as the river current flowed by. I'd be visited by the occasional bird or butterfly. Now and then a deer or a blue heron might wander into view. Mostly I sat in complete soul-deep contentment, not a worry on my mind.

At that age I didn't think of my time sitting under that tree as time with God. I simply was with God. God knew me and loved me before I had any thought of seeking after Him.

I don't know what kind of tree my tree was. I am guessing it was a maple, or it could've been an oak. I loved that tree. I loved the hours I spent with that tree in the woods by the river.

Nathanael's tree is a fig tree. You might be interested to know a few things about the fig tree.

A fig tree is about fifteen feet tall and its branches spread out about 25 feet in width like an umbrella, creating a space that is almost like a private room. If someone wanted to get away from the chaos of a one-room house, he or she would sit under the fig tree. They would sit there to read scripture or to reflect or to pray. Sitting under a fig tree was a sign of seeking and praying for God's living presence. (source: Paul E. Flesner)

The fig tree is the third tree mentioned by name in the Bible, after the Tree of life and the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In Genesis 3:7, Adam and Eve use the leaves of the fig tree to sew clothing for themselves after the Fall, when they realize that they are naked.

The rich symbolism of the fig tree and the book of Genesis remind us of some of the ways God knows us. God knows us because God created us. God knows the idea of us, before we have even been made. God knows us.

God knows us in the garden of our innocence, and God knows us when, like Adam and Eve, we sin against Him.

Sometimes we'd rather not be known quite so well. We want to hide from God, as Adam and Eve did. We fear that, if God really knew us, God would reject us or punish us – cast us out. Truth is, God already knows us, before we know ourselves, deeper and truer than we know ourselves. God wants to “cast out,” it's true. But God does not want to cast out you and me.

God wants to cast out all fear. God wants us to know that we are loved and received and accepted just as we are, warts and all. There is no need to fear.

Take courage. Look at yourself as God sees you – all the lies stripped away. All the masks and facades stripped away. All the public faces you put on to hide your flaws or your pain or your fears...all the public faces stripped away.

Take courage. Look at yourself as God sees you. God sees your true self, the essential you, the beauty of you as God created you. And God loves you. It's an old cliché, I know, but God has a plan for you. God loves you, and God has a plan for your life. It's true.

Jesus sees Nathanael under the fig tree; Jesus knows Nathanael before Nathanael knows Jesus. Jesus sees Nathanael as beautiful, in all his reluctance and imperfection. God knows us, past, present and future. How, then, can we know God better?

### **III. How can I know you better?**

In one sense, there is nothing we need to do to know God better. God pursues us. God desires a relationship with us and continually woos us.

At the same time, God has created us to desire Him. We are restless until we find our

rest in Him.

In v. 51 of the text we're studying today, Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man promised in Daniel 7:13. He also describes himself as the ladder between heaven and earth that Jacob dreams of in Gen. 28:12.

Jacob's ladder. Relationship with God, symbolized as a spiritual ladder – we climb higher, higher, as the old hymn says, achieving greater and greater knowledge of God as we grow in the faith. Meanwhile, God stoops lower and lower, coming down the ladder to join us in our human struggles and sufferings. The greatest example of God coming down the ladder is Jesus Christ. He was fully divine and yet set aside his heavenly throne in order to live among us, fully human, suffering for us, walking with us in our struggles. A king who knows the sorrows of his people. A Savior who knows our trials and temptations. Jesus is the ladder between heaven and earth, forming a bridge, a connection between God and humanity.

How can I know God better? Jesus, himself, is the answer. Upon meeting him, Nathanael declares, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (v. 49).

One scholar puts it this way: “God wants to be in relationship with us, reaching out to us and inviting us to reach out to God” (Elton W. Brown).

God knows us. God wants us to know Him better. As we sit under the fig tree together this morning, we can rest in complete soul-deep contentment, secure in this relationship. Our God is a God we can trust. We can lean on him like the solid trunk of a strong tree.

### **Closing.**

On this weekend of the Martin Luther King holiday, it is appropriate to honor Dr. King. Dr. Vincent Harding, historian, author and civil rights activist, was an associate of Dr. King. He was also a professor at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, a Methodist seminary. Dr. Harding died a few years ago at the age of 82. In an interview in the Union Tribune, Dr. Harding

said that King's detractors like to point out that he was a human being, that he had faults, human foibles. He was certainly not a saint, Harding points out. He made mistakes in judgment. He put his marriage to the test. He also suffered from human frailties, like anxiety and depression.

Mark Trotter, United Methodist pastor, comments on the Harding interview; I think his words crystallize the spiritual truths in today's gospel reading:

"Christianity," writes Trotter, "proclaims a God who came to us as we are, accepted us as we are, forgave us and gave us new life, and thus revealed that we do not have to be righteous in order to be loved by God. We don't have to have a pure life in order to follow Jesus. We just have to be faithful.

"He comes to us as he came to his disciples, and says to us, 'Follow me.' To 'follow me' means, identifying with the poor and the oppressed, loving the sinner, and living sacrificially for others in this world, taking up your cross. That is the sole qualification for everybody to be his disciple -- that you will take up your cross.

"Martin Luther King understood that, I think, probably better than anybody else in our time. Like all historical figures, he will be interpreted from different perspectives. But the way he would want to be interpreted is that he was a 'servant of Christ.'"

God knows Nathanael. God knows Martin Luther King. God knows you and me. God sent His Son, Jesus, that we might know Him better. Like Nathanael and Martin, may we take up our crosses and follow Him.

Amen.