

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“Encounter”**  
***Beyond Beliefs pt. 1***  
**John 1:43-51**  
**January 7, 2018**

It's a new year and a new beginning for us in our worship. We're going to be walking through the Gospel of John this winter and spring. And I'm really excited about that because John has a very unique way of telling the story of Jesus...

Of course, each of the four gospels tells the story in a little different way. But the Gospel of John has an entirely different flavor to it, one that I think we are especially in need of today.

There's an ancient tradition of comparing each of the gospels to one of the four creatures that first appears in Ezekiel's vision in the Old Testament: **the man, the ox, the lion, and the eagle.**

Without unpacking each of these, for today know that the eagle became the symbol of the Gospel of John... because John's gospel invites us to a different perspective... to a different way of seeing.

The eagle soars high above the ground. It can see beyond what is right in front of its eyes. It sees the bigger picture. And legend has it that the eagle is the only animal that can stare into the brightness of the sun.

This is what the Gospel of John invites us to do.

In fact, you might say that John is the mystic's gospel. It helps us to peer into the mystery that is too bright for our normal eyes... and see the horizon that is bigger than the rational concrete facts in front of us.

And that's something we in the church desperately need in our time. We get so stuck in the concrete, rational mind, that we can't see anything else. This is a real problem for us.

As wonderful and helpful as our rational mind can be, it is also limited. There is so much it can't do. There is so much it can't see.

So, when we try to use our rational mind to understand things like love, and beauty, and joy... and yes... even mysteries like God and Christ... we will inevitably get stuck.

And that's where the church finds itself today. You see, in our culture... we've made the **logical part** of our mind, **lord and ruler of our lives**. It's become the dictator over all the other parts of our mind, all the other ways of knowing...

It hasn't always been this way, but since about the time of The Enlightenment, we have been stuck in the rational... and forgotten that it's only one part of our mind... one way of knowing.

***The Gospel of John invites us to other ways of knowing.***

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That's what we see happening in this story with Nathaniel... from our gospel reading this morning. There's a reason John put this story at the beginning of his gospel. He's the only one that tells this story about Nathaniel. But he tells it because it's an essential story if you're going to understand the rest of what John is up to.

Nathaniel was sitting under a tree, minding his own business, when his buddy, Philip, came up to him and said, "You're not going to believe this, but we've found the Messiah, the one our souls have been waiting for, the one we've been longing for. Jesus of Nazareth."

Well, Philip was right. [pause]

Nathaniel wasn't going to believe it. There was an old truth that everyone knew, "Nothing good comes out of Nazareth."

Besides, this wasn't the first time Nathaniel had heard about someone claiming to be the Messiah, the Holy One of God. You see, in that time, every few years someone new came along making this claim.

Someone new would come along and claim to be the Messiah. And they'd gather followers or start a movement... but after awhile... it would peter out. This claim that Philip was making about Jesus was nothing new.

Which is to say, there are all kinds of reasons for Nathaniel to be skeptical. What Philip is saying about Jesus doesn't add up. It's a bunch of excitement over a whole lot of nothing.

Any thinking, educated person ought to know better... and Nathaniel is certainly a thinking person. Jesus may be a great rabbi from a town in Nazareth, but that's all he is... because, lets face it, ... that's all logic will let him be.

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You know the feeling?  
I certainly do.

There's a lot that our Christian history, and our scriptures, and our theology have said about Jesus that simply doesn't add up. They just aren't rational.

I was recently talking with someone even quite young who said to me, "You know, I want to believe in God. But I just don't know how."

I get it. I do.

You hear these things about Jesus,  
Or you're taught things about God,  
but it doesn't add up with that educated, logical mind of yours.... and you feel stuck.  
You don't know what to do.

If you've ever been there... like I have...  
with Nathaniel under the tree...

then let me just admit that the church hasn't served you very well in the last few centuries. Because what has the church had a tendency to do? Shout louder, "Believe it!" Hoping that our shouts will drown out your doubts. Or we've tried to explain rationally, a reality that is beyond reason's capacity.

And maybe they do for a while.  
But for some of you, it doesn't last.

You're not trying to be difficult; it's just that you're not going to deny your own mind. If you can't reason it out, you simply can't go on pretending. And so you struggle with your rational mind

trying to understand things like, how Jesus could possibly be both human and divine. It just doesn't make sense!

Or you try to figure out how anyone could believe in the Trinity, one God in three persons. It's just not logical, no matter what kind of advanced mathematics you bring to bear on it.

Or the resurrection of the dead, for that matter?

Or the belief that the Spirit of God is somehow present in your life?

No matter how hard you try, you can't cram the square peg of Christian belief into the round hole of your logical mind. It just doesn't fit, does it?

"Nothing good comes out of Nazareth." This is what you know.

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If that sounds like you at all...then the Gospel of John was written for you. Like I said, John is going to invite us to soar up above... and see the landscape beyond what our rational minds can grasp.

Because the truth is, there is more than one way of knowing things.

And these days our culture is finally starting to remember that. These days, psychologists and neuroscientists are telling us that we are more than rational beings. There are other ways of knowing... beyond believing facts.

They are telling us that as brilliant as the rational part of our mind can be, it is also limited, obsessive, and repetitive.

They are telling us that reason is only one antenna. "We also need our bodies, our emotions, our hearts, our nose, our ears, our eyes, our taste, and our souls."<sup>1</sup>

You see, as much as reason and ration can achieve, when left to itself, it can also severely limit... and bind and reduce.

This is what scientists are now telling us.

Pascal was a French mathematician and physicist in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. But he also understood the limits of ration. "The *heart* has reasons, that reasons knows not," he wrote. He also said, "reasons' last step, the logical mind's last step, is recognizing that an infinity of things surpass it."

There is so much more than what your logical mind can see.

Einstein, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, recognized that too. "We should take care not to make the intellect our god; it has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality. It cannot lead;" Einstein wrote. "It can only serve."

We're recognizing this again... but this isn't new. It's what the ancients always assumed. Gregory the Great, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, was saying that. "Love itself is a kind of knowing."

Love is a kind of knowing.

This is what neuroscientists are now rediscovering.

There are different ways of knowing. Different ways of seeing. We have more than one set of eyes.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 55.

And to really grasp that, I want to invite you to imagine three different people who watch the same sunset.<sup>2</sup>

The first person was like most of the world, soaking up the moment, just enjoying the event itself. This person deals with what he can see, and feel, and touch, and move, and fix, and that's enough for him. He doesn't spend much energy digging behind the surface of things. He watched the sunset with the first eye, and it was good. And he enjoyed it greatly.

A second person watched the sun set. She enjoyed all the beauty that the first did, but more. Like all lovers of technology and science, she also enjoyed imagining the earth rotating on its axis, creating the sunrise and sunset.

And she imagined the power of the sun's gravity moving the planets in a kind of dance orbit... Through her imagination and reason, she saw with the second eye, and that was even better.

But a third person watched the same sunset. And she watched with all the awareness of the first and the second. But she had learned to move from seeing, to explaining, to "tasting."

She moved into awe before an underlying mystery of the moment. She became aware of her own deep connection with all of life. And a spaciousness, a presence, opened up within her.

She was using the third eye... and that was the best.

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This third eye, this third way of seeing... is the kind of seeing that we are invited to in the Gospel of John.

"Nothing good comes out of Nazareth." Nathaniel said.

"Come and see," Philip invites.

Come and encounter. It's John's invitation to us all.

*Because we're not going to figure Jesus out just sitting under the tree thinking about him.* Your rational mind alone, by itself, can't take you there. "Reasons' last step is recognizing that an infinity of things surpass it." Pascal said.

The invitation to faith, is to come and see... to taste and encounter... and know in a different way.

"Come and see," Philip says. So Nathaniel gets up and he goes.

And what does he find?

He finds someone... who sees him with all three sets of eyes. Someone who knows him already in the deepest way.

"I saw you..." Jesus tells Nathaniel.

"I saw you..." Jesus says to us. "I saw you beneath the tree..."

I saw you wrestling with your questions... not sure what to think.

I saw you."

Of course, Nathaniel is feeling a bit exposed. Maybe his cheeks flush, I don't know. But I do know we're not used to being seen... not like that, not where someone knows our deepest self.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 27.

And that encounter moves Nathaniel out of his rational mind... into awe... and wonder... and the words just stumble out of him, "Truly you are the Son of God."

And this is just the first glimpse. There is more...so much more present in Jesus that Nathaniel hasn't even begun to see.

"You will see greater things than this." Jesus tells him. "You will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon Me."

It's a reference to that ancient story from Genesis 28 when Jacob is a young man. Jacob is on the run from his twin brother Esau who is ready to kill him for stealing his birthright inheritance and his father's blessing.

Jacob, in the middle of nowhere, lies down at night and has a dream. And in this dream there is a ladder reaching up to the heavens with angels ascending and descending on it.

Jacob wakes up from his dream... and he realizes that he was encountering something... something more than his rational eyes could recognize. **"Truly the Lord is in this place and I did not know it," he says. "This place is the gateway of heaven."**

Jesus was harkening back to that story.

And Nathaniel was a good Jew. He knew his scriptures. He knew what Jesus was saying. It's the same thing Jesus is saying to us now. "There is more to me than meets the eye." "Don't make intellect your god. It's a good servant, but it cannot lead."

So over the next few months, as we explore the Gospel of John, let your heart begin to lead you.

Come and see... and listen to your gut just a bit more.

Taste and see.

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If you're a bit like Nathaniel, and maybe a bit like me, there are all kinds of questions and doubts you have wrestled with along the way, if your rational mind has gotten you stuck on trying to make sense of your theology...

Then let me invite you to get out from under the shadow of that tree.

Let me invite you to encounter wonder... and awe... at the One who was so full of life and joy, his very presence is healing and dynamic.

Let me invite you to open up your heart... to the One who sees you... who really sees and knows you better than you know yourself... and holds all that you are in grace and love.

Instead of letting your disbelief harden into skepticism or negativity, which is so easy... learn to trust other ways of knowing. Learn other ways of seeing...

Allow awe and wonder to mold your life.

In Jesus, there is an infinity of love,

And it is flowing to you

And it is flowing to our world... just past the limits of your intellect.

***Come and see.***

Amen.

## Silent Reflection

*“Love Itself is a Kind of Knowledge” ~Gregory the Great*

*“Faith: The beginning of love.*

*The end of love: knowledge of God.” ~Evagrius*