

YOU NEVER KNOW
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in Brookfield, Connecticut
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Texts: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18 & John 1:43-51

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

When I was a kid I went through an Elvis phase, and I was especially fond of Elvis' early period, before the sideburns and the jumpsuits and all that. I'd save up my allowance, and I'd nag my mother into taking me to Kmart, and I'd buy a new Elvis record. And when we got home, I'd run up to my room and listen to it on my portable record player—the kind that opened up like a suitcase and had a little mono speaker in the front. I'd lay there on my shag carpet listening to “Hound Dog” and “Jailhouse Rock” and “Heartbreak Hotel” over and over until it was time for dinner.

One year on my birthday, my grandparents were visiting, and we had a birthday party with cake and ice cream, and after I blew out the candles, it was time to open presents. My grandparents' present was square and flat, so I had a pretty good idea what it was. I tore off the wrapping paper, and sure enough, it was an Elvis record. But it wasn't the kind of Elvis record I wanted. It was one of his gospel records.

I was crushed. But I didn't want to make my grandparents feel bad, so I acted all excited. I made a big fuss about how much I loved it. And I had everyone fooled—except for my grandmother. She gave me a look, and I could tell she wasn't buying it. Then later on, after the party, she sat down next to me and said, “You didn't really like your present, did you?” And before I could say anything, she gave me that look again.

It wasn't a hard look. It wasn't an angry look. She wasn't upset that I didn't like the record. She wasn't mad at me for pretending like I did. It was just a look of acknowledgement. She

was just letting me know that she saw me. When I opened that gift and made all that fuss, she saw me—not the person I was presenting myself as, but the person I really was. Which made a huge impression on me—obviously, since I'm still talking about it forty-five years later.

It was a little bit embarrassing to be found out like that, and kind of humbling to realize I wasn't as slick as I thought. But it was also comforting. I was trying to hide something about myself that I thought was unacceptable, and my grandmother made me feel like I didn't have to do that with her. She saw me for who I was and loved me anyway.

So what does this have to do with the readings today? Well, when I write a sermon, I usually start with a question—something about the text that I don't understand, something that doesn't make sense. What does this verse mean? Why is this word here? Etc.

The question that got me going this week was: Why does Nathanael change his tune so abruptly when he meets Jesus face to face? I mean, one minute he's making a snotty remark about Jesus, asking if anything good can come out of Nazareth, and the next minute he's declaring that he's the Son of God. And all because Jesus saw him standing under a fig tree? I didn't get it—until I thought about my grandmother and what a powerful thing it is to be seen, and then it dawned on me. When Jesus says “I saw you” to Nathanael, it makes him feel the way I felt when my grandmother said that to me. It makes him feel known and accepted. It makes him feel worthy of someone

else's love. And that's why he has this sudden change of heart. That's why he drops the attitude, leaves his old life behind, and starts a whole new life as a disciple.

How else can you explain it?

I guess you could argue that Jesus uses some kind of divine power on Nathanael, like a Jedi mind trick. But that makes it seem like only Jesus can have this kind of life-changing effect on someone, which isn't true. We all have the ability to do what Jesus does. We all have the ability to see the people around us. We just don't always take the time. We get distracted by other things, we get wrapped up in ourselves, and we don't stop to think about the difference we could make just by noticing who someone really is.

Listen to the psalmist describe what a gift that is:

"O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely."

We may not be able to do what God does, we may not be able to look into someone's soul, but we can pay attention, we can be present, we can have empathy, we can show compassion, we can make a connection. Which may not seem like much, but you never know. You never know how you might impact someone. You never know how a look or a word or a gesture might change someone's life and stay with them forever.

I think that's the power of this story. I think it shows us what we mean to each other and how important even the simplest connection can be. Think about your own lives. Think about the people you've known who did for you what my grandmother did for me. Think about how it felt to be seen and accepted, and how those moments shaped you. You wouldn't be the person you are without them.

So ultimately, I think this story is calling us to take every opportunity we can to be that person in someone else's life—to be the one who says, "I see you," and to trust that even when those words don't seem like much, you never know. Just like Jesus. If he did have some kind of divine power that he used on Nathanael, that was it: the power to put his trust in God completely and know that these may have been his words coming out of his mouth, but it was the Spirit who was speaking through them. Amen.