

Sermon: Known & Loved

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; John 1:43-51**

One dimension of God's relation to humans is that God knows us. The edited reading from Psalm 139 makes that perfectly clear; we recommend reading the whole thing to get the full effect. It makes a natural lead-in to the Gospel passage.

The psalmist wrote, 'O LORD, you have searched me and known me...You search out my path...' Searching implies finding, and the theme is echoed in John's Gospel where there's a lot of seeking and finding going on. Jesus found Philip. Philip found Nathanael and told him, 'We have found the Messiah.'

Jesus knows things about Nathanael that are beyond the normal human range of knowing, which echoes how the LORD was present even when the psalmist began to be. But then, Philip knows Jesus as the Messiah and Nathanael knows Jesus as the Son of God and the King of Israel.

Everyone seems to be looking for someone and they all know stuff.

As Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo once said, these guys 'have a whole little thing going on. But I get it. Wink, wink, nudge, nudge. Bob's your uncle.'¹

According to John's timeline, all this happened on the third day after John the Baptist testified that he was the 'voice of one crying out in the wilderness,' in the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Things will begin to happen quickly now. The next stop for Jesus is a wedding in Cana.

The bottom line is, we're known by God, God seeks us out, and God calls us.

The Gospel passage includes a lot of details that John's audience might have been familiar with, but which escape us now. For example, who are the other prophets Philip mentioned? What is the significance of the fig tree? And then there is Jesus' reference to Nathanael as 'an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.' What's that about?

'The prophets' probably means Elijah, the last of the prophets and thus the one who represents them all, and who is also expected to return soon, like the Messiah.

The fig tree could signify many things. Some rabbis used to teach or study in the shade of a fig tree. Some scholars compare the Law to a fig tree in its many branches. In Micah, the fig tree represents peace and plenty (4:4). Matthew and Luke both feature fig trees in their Gospels. And, of course, in Mark, Jesus curses a fig tree (11:12-15).

So, what was Nathanael doing under this particular fig tree? We don't know, but it's something that has kept scholars busy for years.

As for Nathanael being 'an Israelite in whom there is no deceit,' we can only think of Jacob who would become known as Israel and who was also kind of a trickster. Maybe Nathanael, unlike Jacob, just happened to be an honest man.

He could also be a little snarky. Did he actually say, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Back in my high school days in Reading, that's something that I might have said about Stoneham before our annual Thanksgiving Day game, and maybe we all do when it comes to high school rivalries, old and new.

Nathanael was said to be from Cana, which is right down the road from Nazareth. He might have just been poking fun – until he went to see who Philip was talking about and realized it was Jesus. And that changed him.

Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone specifically so he could call someone. Otherwise, why bother?

Nowadays, we're more likely to text than to call, but it's the same idea – we want to connect with someone, and we choose who to call. Whoever that is can choose to answer, or not. We hardly ever call strangers on purpose anyway, unless we're doing some fundraising. We only call the people we know and like.

So, imagine your friends' joyful surprise when you call them out of the blue and they tell you that they have been *looking* for you, *waiting* for you, *hoping* you would call, for a long time. And then it seems like only yesterday that you last spoke together.

But first, you must make the call. Even Jesus needed to call people. In what ways are we answering him?

The psalmist was right: God does know all about us. God knows when we sit down and when we rise up. God is acquainted with all our ways.

That level of intimacy got to be too much for Job in his time of testing and grief. He even asked the LORD, 'Will you not look away from me *for a while*?' (7:19)

According to James Mays, the psalm ‘nurtures an awareness of the LORD as the total environment of life’² – you might say we are all enclosed in divine reality.³ God is present in our lives always, like it or not. Some rejoice in this; others might need a break now and then.

What makes Psalm 139 a favorite is that it includes the bad with the good. The lectionary only shows us the good, presumably because the bad is too scary and might traumatize us if we heard it in church. Spoiler alert in case you had planned to read the entire psalm on your own: Prof. Mays wrote,

‘In the worldview of the psalms, the wicked and their dangerous threats to those who base life on God are an important part of the reality in the midst of which faith must live.’⁴

This is how faith gets stronger, by resisting evil. But notice the psalmist isn’t asking for help. The enemies described in verses 19-22 are God’s enemies. They are that part of society whose moral conduct opposes and ignores God, and that is unthinkable to the psalmist.

God calls each of us, but in different ways. We all respond differently too. Sometimes, we put our hands up and say, ‘No, thank you,’ maybe because we can’t believe what we’re hearing. But God will call again. And again. Until one day, when it’s so obvious what we must do, all we can say is, ‘Okay.’ And off we go.

So, when God comes to town from out of nowhere and says, ‘Follow me,’ it’s not a question, and our proper response is to come and see, to know and be known, and to be loved by the One who made us.

Amen.

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¹ [https://ncis.fandom.com/wiki/Truth_or_Consequences_\(episode\)](https://ncis.fandom.com/wiki/Truth_or_Consequences_(episode)) Season 7, episode 1.

² James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989), 425.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 428.