

“Under the Fig Tree”

Micah 4:1-5; John 1:43-51 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might be inspired to get up and follow the One who knows us and loves us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

It's quite something, that vision from Micah. Everyone streaming to learn the loving wisdom of God, turning their weapons into gardening tools, sitting under their own vines and under their own fig trees. It's quite something to have your own fig tree. Have you ever met a fig tree? I've never lived in a house with one, but I met one once. My friend Lee, a colleague in Alabama, had one in her front yard at a house she lived in briefly. I'm not sure I ever saw that tree more than once or twice, but I loved that tree. I suppose it helps if you like fresh figs. But it's only partly about the fruit. The way the branches spread, low and wide and welcoming. A fig tree is a tree for tree climbers. A fig tree makes you really believe all the birds of the air could find a home in its branches. A fig tree offers you a shady place to rest, and if it's the proper season, you would barely have to stand up to reach a tasty snack.

I know it's the peace and safety and plenitude we're probably supposed to focus on in this passage, but truly, the fig tree is where it's at for me. It's all wrapped up cozily in that beautiful image. Which is why it's so interesting that the fig tree comes up again in our other scripture reading. I need to tell you – because I always have to say it if it comes up – that John 1:43-51 is a very special passage for me. Some of you

have heard the somewhat silly story of my call into ministry, by the iced tea machine at Camp Walter Scott in Southern Illinois. Perhaps you can imagine what it's like to enter seminary directly out of college, 22 years old, with classmates that were coming from impressive first and even second careers, some of whom were older than my parents at the time. Perhaps you can imagine what it was like to be surrounded by people who really did hear voices from the heavens and see light breaking through the clouds like they were Isaiah or someone, and who were called but ran for decades like they were Jonah, until finally succumbing into the arms of God. This is to say: many of my classmates had Very Dramatic Tales of how they ended up at seminary, so it was difficult to admit that I was there because it had occurred to me I could do that. No, honestly, it was worse than that. It had occurred to me that I could do it and be – well, it felt like better at it, but what's more precise is that I knew I could more organized than the youth pastor I was watching lead music after lunch in the dining hall. I'd seen that guy try to lead a meeting.

It's quite a something to admit, at age 24, that God used your arrogance to call you into ministry. So I just didn't talk about it that much. But then I had to do field ed. And my field ed supervisors – with all my awesomeness, it turned out I needed two – those guys liked to make me talk about things I didn't always want to talk about, like the story of my call. But it turned out to be a gift. We were talking about how many of my peers were using the story of Isaiah's call to be a prophet, with its smoke and burning coals and seraphim, as one of the readings at their ordinations.

And one of my supervisors – to this day, I can't recall if it was Drew or Tim – suggested that I should look for a story in scripture that felt like a better fit for me. And, he added – and this is what made all the difference – “I think you should look in the New Testament.” And that is how I found Nathanael.

“Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Were more relieving words ever uttered? Okay, perhaps that doesn't make as much sense to anyone else as it does to me. So let me explain what I saw happening here. Nathanael, upon being invited to come and meet the Messiah by his friend, basically insults him. But instead of being rejected or scolded when Jesus shows up, he finds himself being seen and known and appreciated in ways he never has before. “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Where another person would have said – and indeed Philip was probably muttering under his breath – “Can't you think before you speak? Could you at least pretend to be polite for once?” Jesus takes this issue, this problem Nathanael has struggled with all his life – the blurting out of whatever occurs to him – and turns it right-side out. He couldn't help but be entirely honest, and Jesus loved him for it. Not despite that fault that everyone else always nagged him about, but because of the gift it could be, if channeled faithfully.

Connecting my story to the story of Nathanael was the beginning of my theory that our strengths and our weaknesses are often the same things, depending on context and degree and intention and so on. But seeing that Jesus calls us into ministry precisely because he already knows everything about us, not in the hopes that

somehow seminary (or Sunday school) will grind off all those rough edges and make us entirely shiny, was the thing that helped me embrace my call, for better or for worse. Having the thing that has always been the asterisk when others describe you – “He’s cool, but sometimes you just have to ignore what he says.” “She’s great, but she can be a bit much.” “You’ll like her once you get to know her; she’s just shy.” – having that whole part of who you are re-framed as a blessing is an enormous, well, blessing. Jesus can see that there are situations in which that thing that you do, that is slightly off from the way other people do things, is going to be the exact thing that is needed. Someday it was going to be important that Nathanael would tell the truth when others might not, that he would say out loud the thing everyone was thinking. “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Let the Church say Amen!

We have digressed. I was trying to talk about fig trees. I needed you to know how precious this story is to me, because now I want to take it in another direction. “Where did you get to know me?” Nathanael asked Jesus, once he’d been seen and re-characterized and loved. And Jesus replied, “I saw you under the fig tree.” And something about that helps Nathanael embrace the magnitude of the Love he is face-to-face with in that moment, and he confesses his faith. Which is awesome and amazing. But also confusing, because this is the first we’ve heard about any fig tree in this story at all. Where was the fig tree? What was Nathanael doing under it? Was it his fig tree? Was it Philip’s fig tree? Is that where he was when he made that

disparaging comment about Nazareth? Or was he mouthing off about something else in the shade of that tree?

In Micah, being under a fig tree is a clear symbol of God's providence for the faithful. But in this story, it almost seems as though the fig tree is where Nathanael has to be called out from under in order to follow Jesus. Was he perhaps a little too safe there? Is it possible that if we stay under our fig trees for too long, our contentment fades into complacency, and our safety degrades into settling for the status quo as long as it doesn't hurt us personally? If we stay under the fig tree too long, might we learn to live with people putting us down for things we actually secretly like about ourselves? Could it be that's where denial creeps in and insists everything is fine, even though it clearly isn't, if you push the leaves to the side and look out at the world? To mangle an inspirational saying: A ship under a fig tree is safe, but that's not what a ship is for.

So what would it take for you to get out from under your fig tree? For many of us, it's really nice up in here. There's shade and fruit and maybe even some nice cushy moss to sit on. Nobody can bother us here, and we don't have to worry about other people's problems, because we can't really see them from here. But what if there were a guy wandering through town who could tell you more about yourself than you ever dared to imagine? What if there were a Person nearby who could make your life make sense? What if venturing out from under your tree meant you could have your life re-framed or re-set or re-directed in a whole new way you've never even dreamt of?

What if following Jesus was worth the risk? What if you looked into scripture and found where that Story reflects your story, and it meant you had to get up and go?

Nobody is insisting you chop your tree down. Following Jesus probably doesn't even require leaving your hometown. There are plenty of people who need God's love right here. Plenty of people who need the shelter and shade of a shared fig tree, plenty of people who've been told they're wrong somehow, in their very being, who need to know that they are precious in God's eyes and always have been.

The unfortunate thing about getting attached to Nathanael the Disciple is that this is the only story we have about him of any substance. He seems like a character I would like to hear from more often. But like Nathanael's compulsion to tell the truth, that might also be a good thing. Because it leaves room for the Spirit to work through our imaginations, opening up entry points all along his journey. And if not him, perhaps there is another disciple whose story opens up a connection to Jesus for you. Or one of the many people Jesus meets along the road or in the villages. And of course, the Holy Spirit is still working, so maybe your story is simply being written with your life, and others will look back years from now and thank you for inviting them in. What will it take for you to get out from under your fig tree? You can come back later, when you need rest and renewal. But the world, the people of God, life, it's all out there. That's where Jesus went. Come and see!