### “We Have Found Him” Steve Finlan for The First Church, January 14, 2024

**Isaiah 60:1–6**

1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. 2For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. 3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

4 Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses’ arms. 5 Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice . . . 6 Camels from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

**John 1:43–51**

43The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” 44Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45Philip 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.” 46Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” 47When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” 48Nathanael asked him, “Where did you come to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” 49Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” 50Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” 51And 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.”

Welcome, everyone, to First Church. I hope you were not adversely affected by the storm. It’s been unusually rainy, and there’s been a surprising late start to the snowy season.

Today’s Scriptures talk about surprising changes and exciting experiences. They show how spirit receptiveness sets the stage in allowing these experiences to take place. By Jesus’ time, the Jewish people had suffered many devastating experiences. They suffered exile to Babylon, then they returned to Judah and Galilee and rebuilt the temple. After this they suffered several conquests and were currently part of the Roman empire. They held hopes for a restoration of self-rule and the coming of a Deliverer who would bring about freedom and vindication.

Messianic hope was a big deal for the Jews. Isaiah 60 is one of those passages that does not mention a Messiah, but seems to be speaking of the messianic age. The Jews knew they had a special message from God, and this is expressed in the line “Nations shall come to your light” (60:3). Of course, some Christians are especially intrigued by the line about foreigners coming, bearing gold and frankincense (60:6). But then, those would be the *expected* presents, coming from Sheba, in the area of today’s Yemen. It pictures the Yemenites and other peoples as bringing tribute to a mighty Jerusalem.

Messianic hope was still alive and thriving in Jesus’ time. Philip believes Jesus is the Messiah, and he goes and tells his friend, Nathanael, that they have found the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. After hearing this, Nathanael is facetious, I think, when he says “Can any good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46). It might be like saying “Can any good come out of Mobile?” Nazareth; like the rest of Galilee, was known to be more rustic and informal in its religious practices than Judaea. Also, no well-known learned rabbis ever came from Nazareth (Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 104–5, 162).

I do think we encounter humor in Nathanael, who seems to be the person called Bartholomew, or Son of Telamon or Tolmai, in the other three gospels (Matt 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14), listed right after Philip in each case. Nathanael is his Jewish name; Bartholomew is a partly Aramaic, partly Greek name.

Jesus does not take umbrage at Nathanael’s remark, but discerns something very positive in Nathanael, the moment he meets him. He says “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” (1:47), showing, also, *Jesus’* sense of humor. Nathanael has jokingly insulted Nazareth; Jesus now jokingly insults all Israel. A pretty daring wisecrack to make!

Evidently there’s something about Jesus’ personality or conversation that makes Nathanael immediately recognize Jesus’ divinity. He calls him the Son of God and the King of Israel. It may be that Nathanael was contemplating Scriptural promises while he stood under the fig tree, and that his friend Philip’s remarks plus seeing Jesus’ face triggered a faith response in him. We can certainly say that Nathanael was spiritually receptive, and that having this insight permanently changed Nathanael’s life. Jesus’ message will be seen as radical by many people. Will you be spiritually receptive as well, and ready to face exciting—maybe radical—changes and growth in your life, as your part in the family of God is revealed? With spiritual insight we learn new things, and find new paths opening up for us. Stay tuned!

After Nathanael’s exclamation, Jesus remarks “you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (1:51)—an extraordinary prophecy. “You” is plural in that sentence, implying that it’s *all* disciples, not just Nathanael, who will see that. It seems to pick up on the vision of Jacob in Genesis, who dreamed he saw a ladder “reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it” (Gen 28:12). Now Jesus pictures himself as the ladder upon which the angels move.

Now, in what sense is “*see*” meant? Will they visually *see* angels, or does it mean “understand,” in that they will come to recognize and understand the hierarchical organization of angels serving under Jesus? In English and in many other languages, “see” has this dual meaning, to perceive something visually, or to comprehend something mentally. Do you see?

I think Jesus is saying that believers will have the power to understand that the angels are organized under Jesus, and serve him. The angels somehow help move the gospel message forward. Why does he bring up angels at this point? Maybe it’s basically a matter of just saying “you’ll discern lots of things, now that you have recognized the Messiah. Angelic organization is just one of those things.” Or it may be that he is saying, “if you become true Israelites, you will all see the vision that Jacob saw.” Jacob was given the name “Israel” after wrestling with an angel (Gen 32:28).

Messiah-recognition is a major theme in all the gospels and in the letters of Paul. One’s life is completely changed when one recognizes who the Messiah is. Jesus says “this is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (John 6:29). When God and a person work together, everything and everyone are changed, and nothing is impossible.

And Paul says Christ is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24). More importantly, Paul goes on to say that we are empowered to “have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16). The humorous exchange between Jesus and Nathanael may indicate some mental synchronicity between them. More crucial is the ongoing receptivity of Nathanael, and all believers, to the love and values embodied in the mind of Jesus.

We are to start reflecting that love and those values in our lives. Our mental-spiritual environment undergoes a great change. It is a new beginning. What will *we* learn when we allow our minds to be re-formed in Jesus?

Philip and Nathanael were loyal apostles to the ends of their lives.Philip successfully evangelized the Samaritans (Acts 8:5–6). Nathanael seems to have gone off east from the Jewish territories and evangelized in other lands, possibly in India (McBirnie, *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*, 130). A less famous pair than Peter and Andrew, or even John and James, they were nevertheless important in the spread of the gospel.

Nathanael demonstrates for us the significance of sincerity and spiritual receptivity. Maybe through him was partially fulfilled the promise we saw in Isaiah 60, “Nations will come to your light” (60:3).

What about *our* light? Are *we* spiritually attractive? Have we opened our minds to God’s spiritual messages? Have our hearts been changed, our minds transformed? Can we say “we have found him,” and that our lives have been changed as a result?

May you be comforted with these reflections today. May you treasure the Spirit within your mind and heart. May you have hope that overcomes despair, love that overcomes isolation, and faith that overcomes the world.