“***In Whom There Is No Deceit***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Feb. 7, 2020

**John 1:43–51**

43 The 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.”

Philip is the catalyst who brings Jesus and Nathanael together. Philip, one of the original five or six disciples, informs his friend Nathanael that he has found the Messiah, and that it is Jesus of Nazareth. Nathanael makes a wisecrack, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” He’s being funny. Nazareth was known as a bit of a liberal town. When I lived in California I used to compare Nathanael’s remark to saying “Can any good thing come out of Berkeley?” Of course it can, but the point is to convey some humor about the town’s reputation.

Philip says “come and see,” and Nathanael does. Nathanael is probably the same person as the one called Bartholomew in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Jesus perceives Nathanael’s honest face, and says “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” (1:47). Jesus wisecracks in the same spirit as Nathanael had, but he communicates a darker and deeper truth, implying that there are a lot of crafty and deceitful Israelites around. We seem to know only a few facts about Nathanael, that he is sincere and humorous, and that he seems to share a hometown with Philip. But that’s enough, that is, his sincerity. It is enough to make Jesus notice his character, and for him to recognize Jesus’ divinity.

Although we are never told the reason, Nathanael is moved to tell Jesus “you are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel” (1:49). Something about the Nathanael’s sincerity enables him to recognize Jesus’ divinity. “Deep calls to deep,” the Psalms say (42:7), and this may be a case where something deep in Jesus calls out to something deep in Nathanael. After Nathanael makes that remarkable faith-utterance, Jesus promises that he will have greater revelations than this, that “you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (1:51).

What a remarkable statement! First, what are angels? They are, literally, “messengers”; that’s what the word means. Functionally speaking, they are servants of God. First Peter speaks of “angels, authorities, and powers made subject to” Jesus (3:22). So angels ultimately work for Jesus. Angels “descending” means they come and draw very close to us, even though most of us don’t even sense their presence. Mostly, we sense the *values* of the angels, rather than their personalities. So be a truth-finder, and the angels will draw near to you. Be as sincere as Nathanael and you will be plugged into the invisible network of angelic support.

Angels “ascending” may refer to angels going up to report to Jesus, or it may refer to the angelic organization, a hierarchy among the spirits. Jesus gives a tantalizingly brief revelation of all this to Nathanael, which is not spelled out either here or later. Angels are mentioned again at the end of John’s gospel, sitting on the bench in the empty tomb, where the body of Jesus had lain (20:12). Before and after Jesus’ birth, an angel comforts Mary (Luke 1:35), and comforts the shepherds (Luke 2:10). Near the end of Jesus’ life, an angel comes and comforts him while he agonizes in the garden (Luke 22:43). In Acts, angels often assist and speak to the disciples (8:26; 10:3), and an angel even breaks Peter and John out of prison (5:19). They do this in order to assist in the spread of the gospel.

Probably the main value of knowing that the angels ascend and descend upon Jesus is to know that there is superhuman spiritual attention and support for us, and that it is all under Jesus’ divine leadership. He is the leader of the heavenly beings, and the guardian of our destiny. Even if angels are invisible to us, they are helping us.

That’s always a valuable lesson to us. The other lesson I see here is the spiritual power and value of sincerity. Jesus perceives Nathanael’s sincerity and comments on it. Nathanael perceives Jesus’ legitimacy and has a personal revelation about it. If we become like Nathanael, we, too, will have personal insights into Jesus’ divinity, and we, too, will be honored by Jesus’ friendly attention. Deep calls unto deep. Since “the pure in heart . . . will see God” (Matt 5:8), there will always be a connection between Jesus and all the pure in heart. The pure can perceive the legitimacy and divinity of Jesus. And he can perceive us; he not only sees us beneath the fig tree, or wherever we are, but he reads our character; he knows our potential.

Again, this supports the insight that Jesus is taking care of us, fostering our growth, planning to receive us when we pass on to the next life. That is when we will learn more about the angels ascending and descending.

Right here and now, it’s important to know that Jesus has a sense of humor, and is approachable. Having Jesus as a friend is the pearl of great price. He appreciates an honest character, and draws close to such a one. These are the people who, to quote Jesus from Luke 8, “hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance” (8:15). That’s all Jesus wants from us. Thank you for hearing the word today. Now go forth and bear fruit.