

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

John 1:43-51

Year B - Epiphany 2, Text: John 1:43-51
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In the lead up to today's pericope, Jesus is in the vicinity of Bethany beyond the Jordan (1:28) and is baptized by John the Baptist. In 35-42, Andrew, who has been following John the Baptist, comes into contact with Jesus and eventually brings his brother Cephas (Peter) to Jesus.

Verses 1:43–46: Jesus decides to return to Galilee. He comes into contact with Philip and says to him, “Follow Me.” Philip comes from Bethsaida, on the northeast corner of the Sea of Galilee. (Bethsaida was the hometown of Andrew and Peter.) Philip finds Nathanael (possibly the same person as Bartholomew, Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14) who lived in Cana near Nazareth (John 21:2). Philip tells Nathanael, “We have found Him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” When Nathanael responds in a negative manner, Philip tells him to “Come and see” (John 1:46).

Verse 1:47: When Jesus sees Nathanael coming toward Him, He says, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” In other words, Nathanael was not encumbered with the qualities of Jacob before his name was changed to Israel (Genesis 27:35; 32:28). Jacob means “cheat.”

Verse 1:48: Nathanael responds, “Where did You get to know me?” Jesus answers, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” During previous centuries, the hope was that, when the Messiah came, people would experience the peace and joy of sitting under their own vine and fig tree (Micah 4:4; 1 Kings 4:25; Isaiah 36:16). If Nathanael is sitting under a fig tree, then the Messianic Age has broken in!

Verse 1:49: Apparently Nathanael makes the connection between sitting under a fig tree and the breaking in of the Messianic Age. He addresses Jesus as “Son of God” and “King of Israel” — even though most likely he does not fully understand the implications of

what he is saying.

Verse 1:50: Jesus then tells Nathanael that he will eventually see much greater things, much greater truths, about the Person in whose presence he finds himself. How true!

Verse 1:51: Many find Jesus' statement in 1:51 somewhat puzzling: “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” The following insights are helpful.

Ascending and Descending On

The Holy of Holies in the postexilic and Herodian Temples was empty — apart from a low, flat stone built into the floor at its center. (The Ark of the Covenant was most likely destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC.) This stone was called the “Foundation Stone” (*eben shetiyah*). It was about 18 inches square and two inches high. Jewish tradition held that Jacob was using this stone as a pillow when, in a dream, he saw a ladder reaching up to heaven with angels ascending and descending on it, and heard God speak to him (Genesis 28). When those who returned from Babylon rebuilt the Jerusalem Temple, they found themselves needing a symbol of God's presence. Again according to tradition, they went to Bethel, found this stone, and placed it in the Holy of Holies.

In Jesus' day, the rabbis ascribed numerous functions to this stone. It was “the navel of the earth,” the point from which the world grew in the initial creative process. It was the point of contact between heaven and earth, between God and humanity. It held the subterranean waters in check and prevented them from flooding the earth. It was also that place where, on the annual Day of Atonement, blood was sprinkled to atone for the nation's sin. However, Jesus declared that He replaced that stone and the Holy of Holies, and their functions. This is but the first of numerous replacements that surface in the ensuing chapters.

