



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Greater Things

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Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” And 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” (John 1:50-51).

Jesus has begun to round up his little team of followers, who will come to be called “apostles,” meaning those who are sent; but nobody knows that yet. So far, they include Simon, whom Jesus nicknames “Peter,” the rock, and Simon’s brother Andrew, and another young man named Philip, all from the town of Bethsaida, on the northeastern edge of a large lake that people call the Sea of Galilee.

Now this little group walks westward, crossing into the region of Galilee, where Philip finds Nathanael, sitting under a fig tree. Philip is excited about Jesus, and he runs ahead and gushes to Nathanael, “We’ve found the one that Moses and the prophets talked about!” That’s an enormous claim – preposterously big, in fact: that here, on this ordinary afternoon, a little band of brothers say they’ve stumbled upon the Messiah himself. Or more to the point, the Messiah has found *them*.

“His name is Jesus, son of Joseph,” Philip blurts out. “He’s from Nazareth!” But Nathanael looks up from under his tree, and with all the dismissiveness of those who think they know the way things really are, he utters what will turn out to be the most ironically foolish question ever asked. Nathanael snorts, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

“Come and see!” Philip says. That’s always the answer to skeptics, isn’t it? Come and see. Look at the evidence. Step outside your prejudices and preconceptions and consider the facts. Keep an open mind, then come and see for yourself.

Nathanael sees Jesus a little way off, and since he’s got nothing better to do for the moment, he gets up and starts walking toward Philip and his new friend. Jesus sees him coming and says to his followers, within earshot of Nathanael, “Now here’s an honest Israelite! There’s no guile in this man. He just says what he thinks.”

Nathanael is impressed that this stranger sizes up his character so well at first sight. “Where did you get to know me?” he asks. “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you,” Jesus answers. A little more conversation passes between them, and before it’s over, Nathanael finds himself declaring, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You’re the king of Israel!” The truth cuts through all his cynicism and, just like that, his doubts melt away, until Nathanael starts to follow Jesus too.

Jesus laughs. Not one of those derisive laughs that mock people when they’re wrong, but a sympathetic laugh that enjoys the moment when somebody catches on – the kind of laugh a teacher has when her students work through a problem and finally come to the right answer. “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree?” Jesus asks. “You’ll see greater things than these. Truly, I tell you, you will see the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

I was reflecting on this story last week, and I found myself wondering whether there are greater things that we should all be on the lookout for. It occurred to me that, like Nathanael, some of us may have settled into a particular worldview, full of assumptions and preconceptions about the way things are, so that we're not really open to some parts of the truth, some possibilities in the providence of God, even if they should walk right up to meet us. I wonder whether some of us have become complacent, in the shade of our own fig tree, confidently missing how God might be on the move.

Now in this country, at least, with all our emphasis on practicality and material rewards, whenever a preacher talks about watching for greater things from God, expectations tend to run in either of two directions.

On the one hand, a long tradition in America takes the form of the Prosperity Gospel. You can fill a big sanctuary, or an even bigger stadium, by telling people that God wants them to be rich – that the rewards for coming to Jesus are material prosperity here and now, and even greater riches in heaven, where the streets themselves are paved with gold. As far back as the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville, the French aristocrat, was fascinated by how, as he wrote in *Democracy in America*, Americans are at once the most spiritually minded and the most materialistic of people. Even today, it's not hard to find on bookstore shelves, or on television and the Internet, all sorts of preachers who will tell you that if you come to Jesus you'll be far richer in every sense of the word.

On the other hand, and more sympathetically for many of us, the greater things we're encouraged to expect

from God often have to do with miracles. To hope and pray for a miracle can be a genuine act of faith, especially for some kind of healing: healing from an illness or an accident, for example, or healing as a radical change of heart to overcome addiction or mend a broken relationship.

Those are good things to hope for, and Jesus himself brought healing all throughout his ministry. In fact, miracles are among the signs the gospel writers use to show that Jesus was not just another wise teacher, but one who uniquely carried in his own being the wonder-working power of God. It's no coincidence, then, that some preachers, and some whole faith traditions, emphasize miracles as the greater things to expect from God. "Expect a miracle!" has been a slogan of revivalists for generations.

I certainly believe in miracles. I think I've seen a few dramatic ones, and on a smaller scale I would say that I see little miracles all the time – miracles in the sense of good things that happen unexpectedly, often in response to prayer, and seem to point beyond themselves, all the way to the grace and goodness of God. I absolutely believe in miracles, for at least three reasons: first, because I believe God can do them; then, because so many honest people have testified to their reality, from biblical times down to the present day; and finally, because they've been a part of my own experience.

I believe in miracles, but as a pastor and one who has tried to follow Jesus all my life, I've seen how dangerous it can be to tie a person's faith to the expectation of any particular kind of miracle. If a person prays to God for some good thing, and then a miracle seems to happen, of course

we thank and praise God for that great gift. But we all know that people often pray for a miracle and the miracle never happens, or at least not in the way that people hoped. We pray for healing sometimes and the person we love still dies. We pray for a heart to be transformed, and the transformation never comes. Then, if our faith is tied to a particular outcome, when that outcome doesn't happen we might end up losing not only the thing we prayed for, but our faith in God itself.

I believe we should all expect greater things from God, but we need to let God show us what those things are.

We tend to make two opposite mistakes in our prayers. Some people pray for very specific things, and if those things don't happen, they lose whatever faith they had, because, truth be told, their faith really came down to believing that God should do whatever it is that they want. For some people, faith functions almost like a kind of magic – as if they were the ones in charge, and they, not God, should determine what counts as a legitimate answer to prayer.

Other people, anxious to avoid the first kind of mistake, fall easily into the opposite error. They expect too little from God. Their prayers tend to be tepid and rather vague, as if they didn't want to ask for more than God could handle. They don't ask for much because they really don't expect God to do very much. They don't expect that God will move in any way that will make a significant difference.

Both of those approaches to prayer are mistakes: making our faith contingent on specific outcomes, as if we

were in charge, rather than God; and expecting too little from God, as if God were not willing and able to do great things.

Real faith, from a Christian perspective, means getting up and following Jesus, wherever he may lead, and expecting greater things from God, but being content to let God show us what those things might be.

Once in a while, those greater things may look like miracles. We might pray for some good thing that seems unlikely to happen all by itself; and then it happens, and there's no other way to explain it but by the grace of God. So we give God thanks and praise, and our faith is strengthened by that experience.

More often, though, we just follow Jesus, and pray that we might be faithful, no matter what; and then we learn to see signs of God's presence all around us. We come to see how God works most often in the gradual transformation of things, including the transformation of our own hearts, because transformation that lasts takes time to develop. It has to be built into the way things are; and for us human beings, that means it has to become part of our character. We have to become a new creation over the course of a lifetime.

Someone said in a Bible study recently that she's learned to "pray big" since she saw the transformation in her sister's life. I love that image. Many of us pray too small, as if we didn't want to give God more than God could handle – or, more likely, as if we didn't want to expect too much, for fear of being disappointed and shaking what little faith we have.

But Jesus tells us to pray big. He says, “Ask, and you will receive.” God is good, but we have to develop eyes to see and ears to hear, in order to recognize answers to prayer when they come our way. Otherwise, we’re like Nathanael, sitting under his fig tree, so sure he knows what’s possible and what isn’t, that he dismisses the very idea that God might be on the move from Nazareth.

God is on the move, and God turns up in all sorts of unexpected ways, in ordinary times and places. People of faith learn to recognize the active, powerful presence of God everywhere, and it gives us hope and courage and strength and peace, no matter what else is going on in our lives, or in the world around us.

“You will see greater things,” Jesus tells his disciples. Long before that’s true in the life to come, it will be true throughout the rest of our lives here and now – if we’re content to let God be God, and show us what those things are, and help us to recognize them when they appear.



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