Benediction: Dear God who created me as the unique person I am and knows me from afar, help me to speak your words so that all of your marvelously made creatures will know you intimately.

Amen

Today’s lections share a theme – or rather two themes – that are very much interrelated. The first is that God knows us better than we know ourselves.

From Psalm 139

O Lord, you have searched me out and known me.  
**2**You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
    you discern my thoughts from far away.

You search out my path and my lying down,  
    and are acquainted with all my ways.  
**4**Even before a word is on my tongue,  
    O Lord, you know it completely.

And from the Gospel:

Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’

And from Samuel we note that God calls the young man by name, knowing where exactly where he is lying in the Temple, even though Samuel didn’t yet know Him.

The second theme is that God calls us. God called Nathanial and Philip to be part of his inner circle – that of his disciples. God called Samuel to let him know what God was going to do, yes. But, as we read more about Samuel in the Bible, we realize that God is calling Samuel to more than just this one prophecy, God is calling Samuel to become the prophet and priest that will serve the Israelites in that transition time between their being ruled by judges and being ruled by kings. God is calling Samuel to get to know God so well that He can interpret God to the people.

The God who knows us each of us intimately calls us into intimate relationship with him. God isn’t just calling Samuel and Philip and Nathanial to a task; God is inviting them into an epiphany[[1]](#endnote-1) – He is calling them to know who Christ is as a manifestation of God. He is calling them to know Jesus as God made flesh – God’s love poured out for us. God calls each of us – each a unique and marvelously fashioned creation – into this same epiphany.

I invite us to take a close look at the last four verses of the Gospel passage, starting with verse 49, where Jesus said he knew Nathaniel because he saw him under the fig tree. Middle Eastern peoples delight in taking in the shade of the fig tree, which provides a natural summer house or arbor. Nathaniel had chosen to use the cover of this dense foliage and large leaves as a screen so that he could be apart from others to meditate and pray to God. In this secluded environment, Nathaniel could pour out himself freely – to really be himself before God. [[2]](#endnote-2) So when Jesus says that He *saw* Nathaniel under the fig tree, Jesus means He was right there – seeing Nathaniel for who He really was, hearing Him as He poured out His soul to God. Jesus, because He was God, heard and saw Nathaniel intimately as He prayed under that fig tree.

Because Jesus had *“seen”* Nathaniel in the way only God could see, Nathaniel realizes who Jesus is and accepts Jesus’s invitation to enter into an even more intimate relationship with Him.

Then Jesus gives this rather startling response to Nathaniel’s acceptance. He says that Nathaniel hasn’t really seen anything yet. That he will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. To understand what Jesus means, we go way back into the Old Testament story of Jacob. Jacob had done a bad thing, tricking his father into giving the blessing intended for his older brother to him. So Jacob was fleeing the anger of his brother, alone, when he grew tired and stopped in the wilderness to sleep. No other human being knew where Jacob was and Jacob must have felt abandoned. But God knew where Jacob was – both physically and emotionally and God in God’s love responded to reconnect Jacob with God. God gave Jacob a dream in which Jacob saw a ladder descending between heaven and earth (connecting Jacob in his place on the earth with heaven through the ministry of angels going up and down the ladder). In referencing this story, Jesus is saying that as Nathanial begins to know Jesus more intimately He will realize that Jesus the Son of Man is the ultimate ladder stretching between heaven and earth -- the point of contact between the finite and the infinite.[[3]](#endnote-3) Jesus reconciles us to the Father, Jesus is the Way to the Father and Jesus is One with the Father.

Just as God lovingly created Samuel, Nathanial, and Jacob, God lovingly knit together all the components that make each of us uniquely who we are. And because God is God, God knows everything we think and do, every utterance we make. God did all this because God sought to be in intimate relationship with us. We aren’t perfect and we don’t always nurture that relationship. Yet, God doesn’t stop. Every day God calls us back into relationship with Him. Every day the God who knows us intimately calls us into intimate relationship with Him.

Amen

1. Lee Barrett, professor of theology, Lancaster Seminary in Feasting on the Word Commentary, Year B, Volume 1, Advent through Transfiguration, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors. Westminster John Knox Press (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. M. Dods, (1903) The Gospel of St. John. In W. Robertson Nicoll (Ed.), The Expositor’s Bible: Luke to Galatians (Vol. 5, p. 130). Hartford, CT: S.S. Scranton Co. (2006 to 2012) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Barrett. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)