

Why is it that, once in a while, sensible, predictable people will do seriously weird things? Things that can't be chalked up to mental illness or a visible change of circumstances. Like delving deeply into a new hobby that had never been an area of interest, or changing to a career that's at odds with one's needs and background, or going off on an unnecessary and dangerous journey. Whatever the reason, we can be glad that people sometimes make bizarre life choices, and not just because it keeps the seminaries full.

Philip and Nathaniel might have been prone to this sort of sudden change. Some speculate that they were followers of John the Baptist before they followed Christ because they were clearly open to the idea that the Messiah could be with them soon, and the text associates them geographically with Peter and Andrew, and Andrew is specifically identified as a disciple of John. If this speculation is correct, then they would be neither the first nor the last to jump from one fringe religious leader to another. They certainly became committed followers of Christ from very little evidence. Philip jumped on board merely because Jesus asked him to. Nathaniel was a bit more complicated.

Philip was excited to tell his friend of his great discovery, that the Messiah had come, but Nathaniel answered with a dismissive remark about Nazareth, the first-century equivalent of a New Jersey joke. But what Nathaniel lacked in creativity, he would make up for in zeal. It took only Jesus telling him that he'd seen him when he thought he wasn't being watched. Just from that, Nathaniel tells Jesus, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" And they were in business. Only after this expression of faith does Jesus start making promises, or prophecies.

We should be deeply grateful for the faith and the works of our spiritual ancestors who jumped into their relationships with Christ. And we should try to follow their examples, at least once in a while. It's not even difficult to get started. Philip shows us how. He does two things. He tells his own story, and he makes a simple personal invitation.

In order to get Nathaniel to meet Christ and follow Christ, Philip could have tried any number of strategies. He could have offered all manner of speculation and embellishment. He could have articulated a theological position on the role of the Messiah in salvation history and individual lives. He could have handed him a tract that said, "If you died today, would you go to heaven?" Instead, he simply did what works, what needed to be done.

The very first thing we're told Philip did after meeting Jesus was find Nathaniel. He didn't wait to see him at the synagogue or run into him by chance or make a mental note to talk to him "soon." He made telling his friend his top priority. Philip found Nathaniel. And when he did, he told him just what had happened in a way that would make sense to them. Philip and Nathaniel had a great deal in common through sharing

a religion and a culture, as well as by living in a small town. So Philip puts the experience into the context that they both shared, not as a strategy of evangelism but because it was the most natural way to communicate what had happened and why it was important.

Nathaniel was skeptical, but Philip was undaunted. Perhaps he knew Nathaniel well enough to expect his first response would be a wisecrack. But nonetheless, it was a response, and he didn't say "no." So Philip remained engaged and followed up with a simple invitation: "come and see." And he did. Nathaniel wasn't offended by his friend's strange new behavior, he was intrigued, curious and eager enough to check his skepticism and investigate for himself. Philip disappears from the story at this point. John doesn't mention Philip again, not even to tell us whether he went with Nathanael to find Jesus again, or whether he left him to find Jesus himself. The phrasing of the invitation, "come and see," together with the fact that earlier in John's Gospel, when we hear the call story of Andrew and Peter, the story is based in part on those disciples visiting the dwelling place of Jesus, suggests that Philip did go with Nathaniel to meet Jesus, if only to help with providing directions.

After they got there, Philip's work was done. Jesus did the rest. He immediately engaged Nathaniel, drawing him in seemingly without effort. It's easy to dwell on the fig tree incident, but Jesus's remark about an Israelite without deceit is more telling. Since, like John the Evangelist and his community, they were all Jews, and well-versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, everyone — both in the story and in the audience — would have understood what Jesus was getting at.

Jesus describes Nathaniel as an Israelite. There were plenty of ways Jews of the day could have referred to their common identity, but Jesus picks one that focuses on the person of Israel, the ancient patriarch who was named Jacob at birth.

Remember that before he received his new name, Jacob was notorious for deceit. He deceived his father Isaac in order to get Isaac to give Jacob the blessing that he intended to give Isaac's favorite son, Jacob's elder brother Esau. On another occasion, Jacob tricked Esau into trading his birthright for a serving of stew. And Jacob in turn was tricked by his own uncle. Remember also that Jacob received a vision of a ladder between heaven and earth with angels ascending and descending, and Jacob later went on to meet God, or an angel, and wrestled with the mysterious other all night. The match ended with Jacob's opponent putting his hip out of joint and giving him the new name Israel. After that divine encounter, Israel no longer practiced deceit.

So Jesus ties the story of Israel to his encounter with Nathaniel. The comparison confirms Jesus's divinity, as Nathaniel would also be without deceit after meeting God, although Nathaniel's confrontation consists of questions, not a wrestling match. But the comparison also suggests that things will be different this time around. Jesus describes

a new vision of a connection between heaven and earth but in this one, God's angels come and go not upon a ladder, but upon the Son of Man. God is doing a new thing, linking heaven and earth through the person of the Christ.

This spiritual connection would seem too holy, or perhaps too esoteric, for us to connect to in any way, but quite to the contrary, we can participate in God's work by following Philip's example. We can connect others to the divine by telling our stories, making personal invitations, and accompanying them to meet Christ in the church. People today are just as keen to have a spiritual connection, just as curious about God, as they were in biblical times. So do something bizarre, something deeply weird, and tell someone you know about what God has done for you, what's so special about coming to church, or what you see God doing in their life. If you can invite people to Bowls and Brews, and praise God, you did a great job of that, you can invite them to church. More than that, walk with them, engage their curiosity and their skepticism, in order that they too might meet Jesus and follow him. For Jesus is no less true to his word. When we follow him and make the connection between God and humanity, we will see greater things than these.