

Under the Fig Tree

A Sermon Expositing John 1:43-51

By Brent Bowden

First Baptist Church of Rochester

I have to imagine that he cringed just a little when the phone rang. Not that he wouldn't be delighted to talk to whoever was on the other end, it's just that the first year of a new pastorate is a very busy time and a ringing phone usually meant it was going to get busier. He was up to his neck in tending to folks' needs and preparing for Sunday - it was already Friday and that's sometimes about when the panic sets in. He was also exhausted. He'd become a father two and a half weeks prior and you know how those first weeks can be with a newborn. Still, he picked up the ringing phone and it was good he did, but what he heard was even more intrusive than he thought. It was Mr. Nixon a local community leader with whom it was good to be in close acquaintance, but on this occasion he needed something.

"We need you to open your church so we can have a meeting. We have something important to talk about." I'm paraphrasing here, but that wasn't all Mr. Nixon wanted. He and several others were getting together to start a movement and he wanted the young pastor to get involved. That was about the last thing he needed, something else to do, somewhere else to be, another problem to solve. He asked if he might think about it for a few hours and he would return the call with an answer. What he meant was that he needed some time to come up with a graceful way to say, "no." He had other important things to be tending to, no energy, no time, no way, couldn't happen. You see, he was under the fig tree.

That's where Nathanael was too. You remember that from our gospel lesson a moment ago don't you? Jesus the Galilean was looking to start a movement and needed 12 folks to help out. He had already recruited Andrew and Simon and then he enlisted Philip who went and got Nathanael. The story is told a little bit out of order, so if we're not careful we'll skip right over it. When Nathanael, skeptical and assuming this chosen one Philip told him of was a snake oil salesman, approached Jesus, Jesus said, "Here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

"How do you even know me!?" Philip asked. Yes, it's a story displaying Jesus's perception and that's astounding, but don't get too distracted by that or you'll miss it. Jesus answered saying, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Right there! That's the spot I'm talking about where Nathanael had been and that young pastor had been - under the fig tree. It doesn't have to be a fig tree for everybody, but it was for Nathanael. That's the place he was after God took notice of him and decided to call him into service, but before he became aware of it. Called by God, but not yet aware of it - under the fig tree.

I actually kind of like that there's not a lot of detail in what was happening in that moment. Perceptive Jesus I suppose could've said, "I saw you under the fig tree and you were thinking about...fill in the blank." Or, "You were really worried about...fill in the blank." Or, "You were looking over at...fill in the blank." But we don't really know what Nathanael was thinking or feeling or doing, we just know that he was there under the fig tree having already been seen and named and called by God, but remaining clueless to the call. For the moment. The lack of detail allows some room for curiosity, some room for parallel processing.

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

Where will you be? What will you be doing? What will be going on around you in that moment when God invites you into some specific part of God's redemptive work. What will you be planning? What will you be working on? What will your life be like? What obligations will you have and what pastimes will you be involved with? How will you be imagining your life shaping up when you're under the fig tree? If Nathanael is instructive for us at all we can safely assume that whatever you're imagining life will be like there under the fig tree; it'll change when you learn that God has already seen you and needs your help.

That's the one thing we can know ahead of time about God's call to service – it's always disruptive like that Friday morning phone call. While that young pastor was trying to figure out how to say, "no," to Mr. Nixon while still staying in his good graces the phone rang again. It was a friend and fellow pastor, Ralph, who had also been talking to Mr. Nixon. The two of them were ganging up now. Ralph said that the goals of the meeting were critically important as was the pastor's participation. A woman in the community had been arrested the night before and charged with a violation of Chapter 6 Section 11 of the Montgomery City Code. Rosa, a black woman, had been charged with declining to move from her seat so a white man could sit down. "This is our chance," Ralph said as I paraphrase again, "this is our chance to do something, to make a change, and it's critically important." Ralph went over the details of the meeting they were requesting at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. It was a public meeting about organizing a boycott of the bus system and it needed to happen quickly. Rev. Dr. King, our young pastor, knew Ralph was right, but he also knew how much he already had on his plate and what does a preacher know about bus boycotts anyway. "Ok," Martin relented, "ok, I'll host the meeting on one condition..." and this is the funniest part of the whole story, the funniest part of being under the fig tree. Martin Luther King Jr., a young pastor in his first year, a new father, drowning in responsibility and looking for a way out of taking on more said, "I'll host the meeting as long as I don't have to do the organizing work."

That's the epitome, friends, of being under the fig tree. God's calling, his service to God, to his community, to the world around him stretched out before him, but he didn't even know he'd been called yet. You know, I guess, that the meeting in question served its purpose, but it didn't go terrifically well. For the boycott to be successful they'd need more solid leadership. At the next meeting an organization was formally founded and Dr. King came with a name in mind to nominate as president. Before he could speak the name, someone else spoke his. Nobody in the room offered another nomination and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. became president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, which would lead the bus boycott for 381 days until the bus system was integrated. Not yet satisfied, the MIA called together a wider net of leaders and together formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the organization under which Dr. King and his coworkers would lead sit ins and protests in places like St. Augustine, Florida; Albany, Georgia; Selma; Birmingham; and Washington where hundreds of thousands of people marched peacefully through the streets of the nation's capital.

The story of the civil rights movement and one of its most iconic leaders is etched in our American history. Tomorrow we pause to celebrate what was accomplished under the leadership of Dr. King and his contemporaries and to bolster ourselves for the vast work still before us. As we pause tomorrow it is worthwhile to remember that Friday morning phone call, that moment under the fig tree when the call of God on the life of a faithful servant had already begun, but wasn't yet known to him. What about you? What will things look like when you're under the fig tree?

Amen.