

John 1:43-51

Epiphany 2B + January 15, 2012
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
The Israelite without Deceit

The Word of the Lord from John 1:47: "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit."
This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. The Cheater and Nathanael

The first Israelite was a cheater, literally: that was his name. He was a son of Isaac and Rebekah, a twin with his brother Esau. With twin boys, it was a race out of the womb: the firstborn would get the birthright, which included double the inheritance and leadership over the family. The second would not. Esau won; and because he was covered with red hair, Esau was his name. He didn't win by much: he emerged from the womb with his brother clutching at his ankle, trying to trip up Esau and take the lead. So right off the bat, the second son was named "Jacob," meaning "he cheats."

"Meet my two sons: Hairy and Cheater." Quite the family.

Jacob lived up to his name. When Esau came home hungry from a hunt, Jacob conned him out of his birthright with a bowl of stew. When Isaac was old, blind and feeble and it came time to bless his sons, Jacob disguised himself and received the blessing of the firstborn. He got what Esau deserved as the firstborn, and that was the last straw: Esau sought to kill Jacob, and Jacob ran away.

So went the early years of the first Israelite, Jacob the cheater. It's interesting that the Lord used all of this in His plans. Before the boys were born, God declared that the older would serve the younger. That doesn't mean that the Lord approved of Jacob's deceits—He didn't need Jacob to cheat in order to accomplish His will. Rather, it means that He can use all things to accomplish His will. He can also use all sorts of people—even a conniving cheat like Jacob.

The Lord had further use for Jacob. As Jacob fled from his angry brother, he had a dream while sleeping one night. "He dreamed," says Genesis 28:12, "and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!" Heaven and earth were connected, tied together by this ladder. As he dreamed, the Lord renewed to Jacob the promise He'd made to his grandfather Abraham: "in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 28:14). The Lord promised that the Cheater would have the honor of being an ancestor of Jesus Christ. Obviously, it wasn't because of Jacob's fine history of honesty and uprightness. This honor was all by the grace of God, an undeserved gift.

And a little later on, the Lord announced a new name for Jacob: he would be called Israel, and he would be the father of the nation of Israel. The cheater became the patriarch of God's chosen people.

Centuries later, a descendant of Israel is born and named Nathanael. We don't know much about him: we know he is from Cana and is the brother of Philip, one of the twelve disciples. Like Jacob in Genesis 28, we find Nathanael sleeping in our Gospel lesson. Like Jacob, Nathanael hears a voice: the voice this time doesn't belong to God, but to his brother Philip. But if it isn't God's voice, it is still God's Word: Philip says, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

It's a startling announcement: the Messiah—whom the entire Old Testament points to—has come, and His name is Jesus. It also strikes Nathanael as a bit strange: the Messiah...from Nazareth? It's

not that Nazareth is a bad place. It's just such an insignificant, forgettable place. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? It's a strange start for the Savior. It's an innocent question, and Philip replies, "Come and see."

Nathanael comes. Why? Because he's heard the Word, and he believes what he has heard. Because he believes it, he doesn't believe that Philip's trying to trick him or that Philip himself has been deceived. He doesn't wonder how this could be possible or how it seems implausible. He simply believes the Word of God that he has heard. This is no credit to Nathanael: it's not like he has an ability that you lack to distinguish truth from error. No, this is the Spirit at work in the Word to give faith.

When Jesus sees Nathanael coming, He says, "Behold, an *Israelite* indeed, in whom there is no *deceit*." As one commentator paraphrased, Jesus says, "Behold, this man is all Israel, and no Jacob." Nathanael is neither deceiving nor deceived: he comes because he believes in Jesus. Nathanael asks Him, "How do You know me?", and Jesus answers, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Jesus confirms what Nathanael believes, that He is no ordinary human being. And this leads us to the two payoff pitches in our Gospel lesson.

The first is Nathanael's confession of faith. He says, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" He tells this lowly-looking teacher in the flesh, "You're God! *And* You are the promised Messiah who will rule over your people forever." That's an extraordinary confession of faith, and an indication that Nathanael knows the Law and the Prophets well.

The second is what Jesus says then; because while Nathanael has confessed who Jesus is, he hasn't declared what the Son of God will do. So Jesus fills in the blank: "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under a fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these. Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. Like Jacob the first Israelite, Nathanael the Israelite will see heaven and earth joined together by a ladder. This time, though, the ladder is Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man. As God and man, Jesus is the bridge between heaven and earth—not just for Himself, but for the people of God. The Messiah has come to do what is necessary for sinners and cheats to get to heaven. He is the Way to the Father. And how will He accomplish this? His ladder will have one rung: His hands will be nailed to it, and His feet to the post. By His death on the cross, He opens heaven to all who believe.

II. Jesus, without Deceit

Of course, there's another Israelite besides Nathanael without deceit—without *any* deceit at all. That's Jesus. Look at His life and the history of Israel, and you'll find things in common, except that what He does has no deception. To stay alive, the nation of Israel goes down to Egypt and comes back to the Promised Land; to stay alive, the infant Jesus goes down to Egypt and comes back. Israel goes into the wilderness and repeatedly rebels against God for forty years, even as God feeds them; Jesus goes into the wilderness and resists every temptation for forty days, even as He fasts. Israel crosses the Jordan to enter the Promised Land; Jesus is baptized in the Jordan to "enter" into His ministry in Judea and Galilee, and to bring us into the Promised Land!. Unlike His ancestors (and everyone else), He's the perfect Israelite, without deceit. No wonder Psalm 130 concludes, "O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with Him is plentiful redemption. And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities (Psalm 130:7-8).

Jesus isn't a cheater or a deceiver. He hasn't cut corners on the price for your salvation, but suffered the judgment for the sins of the world. He didn't poor-boy the cross and fake the suffering. He didn't pull a fast one on the devil and trick him into a loss: He stripped Satan of power forever by His death and resurrection. This is Good News for you: there's no chance of the Father saying, "My Son

duped Me, and you're really still dead in sin." There's no chance of the devil waking up and finding he was tricked but still has power left. He's done.

Furthermore, Jesus gives you the way of salvation straight up. You're sinful, and the wages of sin is death. He paid that price for you on the cross, so that you might be forgiven. It's not an appealing message or a popular one: the Lord Himself says in His Word that it's offensive. But it's true. It's so straightforward that a young child can understand it, and a younger child yet can believe it. One of the many ways people outsmart themselves right out of salvation is by making Christianity harder or more confusing than it is.

Thanks be to God that your Savior isn't deceptive. Parts of Him remain mysterious—by definition, the Son of God is going to be beyond your comprehension, and He's not going to tell you everything you want to know about your life; but the Word that He reveals to you is truth and it is life.

As a quick aside, this should inform the Church about evangelism. Because Jesus reveals Himself as the Savior of all nations, one of the underlying themes of the Epiphany season is evangelism and missions. In evangelizing—in speaking the Gospel—to both believers and unbelievers, the Church should never use deceit as a tactic. It should never bait people with one message and then spring the truth later on. For instance, the Church should never soft-peddle a sin to seem more attractive to sinners, and then tell the truth later; nor should the Church ever pretend to be about other messages to bring people in, then give them the Gospel later. The Church is about the proclamation of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. It's never been an attractive message—it's always been offensive to many. It's also the power of salvation to all who believe. As our Lord spoke the truth without deceit, come what may, so we ought to speak the truth plainly and boldly, come what may. Look at what brought Nathanael to faith: "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." No hooks, no bait, just the truth of Scripture. It makes no sense to evangelize with deception. Pick your fights, sure, and act wisely: but always speak the truth, and always speak the truth *in love*. And as the Church speaks the truth of God's love in Christ, so it should *act* in love to the poor, the hungry, the sick and all who are in need.

Jesus is without deceit. The same can't be said for you: you're *born* a deceiver and a cheat, just like everybody else. Look at children: they don't have to be taught to lie. They don't have to be taught to evade and deny when they've broken something. They don't have to be taught to try to cut into the front of the line and grab the biggest piece of cake. It just comes naturally. It goes with the sinful nature that you and I have from the moment we're conceived.

It doesn't get better when you're older, just more refined. You're still tempted to take advantage of others, to cut in front or give minimal effort. You're still tempted to downplay your involvement when a mistake is made, keep silent if there's no one else to point at or obfuscate the truth when it's convenient for you to do so. Speaking of silence, silence can be deceptive too, when you're silent about sin and therefore appear to approve of it. You're called to speak the truth. And speak it in love: if people are to be offended, let them be offended by the truth, not by rudeness or anger.

Now, you're not a kid anymore; and you've probably gone a long way in disciplining yourself so that you don't deceive or cheat the way you could. That takes some self-control. But the fact that you *have to* control your self means that there's still something wrong with you that needs to be controlled: if you were honest and good by nature, no such discipline would be required!

There's worse deception though: it's self-deception, usually about your standing before God. It's lies like "God loves me because I'm good enough" or "nice enough" or "better than I was before." It's lies like, "Even though this sin is normally wrong, it's okay for me because I make up for it in other areas." It's deception like, "I may have some problems, but I'm not so sinful that God would condemn me, because I'm doing my best." Or, "I can't confess that sin because it's too horrible and I can't admit to

myself that I'm guilty." All of these are attempts to deceive yourself. All of these are an attempt to cheat death and deceive God by persuading Him that you deserve eternal life because of your life and character. All of this is the teaching of the devil—the deceiver, the father of lies. You can fool yourself, but you can't fool God.

So you hear God's Word—God's honest truth about your sin, and you repent. You say once again, "You're right and I'm wrong. You're holy and I am not. I'm a sinner who doesn't deserve Your help." And because of God's Gospel you say, "But I don't ask for your help because of who I am or what I do—I ask for forgiveness because of who Jesus is and what He has done for me." The truth is that God forgives you for Jesus' sake. He didn't choose Jacob to be a patriarch because of his record of honest living: He chose Jacob out of His own mercy, despite who Jacob was. Jesus didn't call Nathanael to faith because Nathanael had done great things, but because He desired Nathanael to be saved. Likewise, you can be sure that the Lord gives forgiveness to you—not because you're good enough, but because He gives it on account of Christ, who is always faithful and true.

As you can be certain that He gives it, you can be certain where He gives it. The Lord—who joined heaven and earth by His incarnation, death and resurrection—remains the ladder between the two today. I do not mean that He provides a way, a ladder so that you must work to climb up to Him; rather, He still comes down to you. This is why worship is so important, because worship centers around the Lord's Word and Sacraments. It centers around the means of grace because that's where Jesus promises to be present—present with you even as He is present with the hosts of heaven. That's why we people on earth can sing with angels, archangels and all the company of heaven—because we are together with them in Christ.

Oh, rejoice this day in Jesus Christ—the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is without deceit, speaking to you His powerful, true Word that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen