

January 14, Epiphany 2B (John 1:43–51)

Jesus' word of insight to Nathanael seems a lot like a carnival grift.

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [January 2024](#) issue

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When the sheriff's deputies raid the sleazy carnival act, it looks like there's no way for the performers to get out of trouble. But the show's bogus mind reader and medium steps up to the lawman and gives him a demonstration of the genuineness of his powers. His mother—Mary, was it?—wants him to know she's not ashamed that he didn't see any fighting in the war. Astonished, the converted skeptic lets the show leave town in peace. The other performers crowd around the mind reader, wanting to know how he did it. He picked up a few details from the man's dress and gait, and he took a guess that Mary would be a popular name in the area.

That's how extrasensory perception is handled in the film noir classic *Nightmare Alley* (and its 2021 remake). Even the most hardheaded, upstanding citizen is on some level a mark, wanting to hear something he doesn't trust himself to know yet willing to believe anyone who says it to him in the right voice. You might think you're going to the show to figure out the trick, but what you want, deep down, is to believe. Even the amoral and cynical mind reader himself wants to believe in someone (and when he does . . . well, you'll have to watch the movie to see how it works out for him).

In this week's gospel passage, Jesus speaks a word of insight about Nathanael that is, on the surface, indistinguishable from a sideshow grift like the ones played in *Nightmare Alley*. He identifies Nathanael as an Israelite without any deceit after nothing more than a middle-distance glance of him under a fig tree, and Nathanael responds by calling him Son of God and king of Israel. I've never quite known what to make of this response by Nathanael. Is it sarcastic? Is it simply credulous? Or is it neither but rather an expression of Nathanael's deep need to be identified by someone, anyone, as an honest man?

Sitting there on the page, this story can seem strange or overdrawn. But it has an unavoidable poignancy all the same. While our own age may appear to us to be disenchanted compared to the ancient Mediterranean world, and while our standards of knowledge may appear to us to be more exacting than theirs, I don't think this essential desire to believe certain kinds of messages—and certain kinds of messengers—has ever gone away. Schools of occult knowledge, from conspiracy theories to astrology, are as popular as ever. Immense prestige can flow to people who predict a short-term trend, unlock the supposed secret causes of personal or communal history, or salve our psychic wounds with external affirmation. Every bid for our attention and agreement has at least a shade of the carnival act. And lurking in the heart of almost all of us is a sucker waiting to be played.

The difference between prophetic insight, as Jesus proclaims it to Nathanael, and a confidence game is not just that Jesus is honest in his motives or that he is drawing on divine knowledge rather than extrapolating from clues. It's a question of the stakes. The Jesus of John's Gospel is equipped to be the world's greatest and most celebrated mountebank or, less cynically, a healer of profound insight and sensitivity. But he doesn't settle for knowledge. You will see much greater things than this flash of insight, he tells Nathanael. You will see heaven open and the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of man. Falling for a con game and experiencing true faith may feel the same, but their object differs.

Nathanael may leap because he has been known or affirmed, or just because he needs something better to do than sitting around under a fig tree. (In the online slang of the last decade, this would be discipleship "for the lulz.") But Jesus ends up promising him that he will land somewhere very different than he may imagine, far outside the guileless self Jesus has identified.

And at this point, too, Jesus' message differs from the carnival hustle: having set the hook, he gives his follower a reason and an opportunity to immediately wriggle off of it. Beholding the promised eschatological Son of man and an army of angels may be a fascinating prospect, but it is also a frightening one. One may have compelling reasons to say, "Thanks, but no thanks." By whatever route it takes, the grift must deliver us to a place of psychological safety. The call of Jesus, he seems to indicate here, offers no such promise. The hoodwinked sheriff goes home with a warm feeling. The disciple, for his own reasons and heaven's, joins the circus.