

Surprise encounter: John 1:43-51; 1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20)

From where does Nathanael's confession, his insight, come?

by [Christine D. Pohl](#) in the [January 10, 2006](#) issue

After meeting Jesus, an excited Philip seeks out Nathanael to tell him they have found the one “about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” But Nathanael’s response is not very promising.

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” he responds skeptically. It’s true: Nazareth was not much as a place of origin for a messiah. But Philip isn’t worried about the setting; in fact, he seems unperturbed by Nathanael’s lack of enthusiasm. “Come and see,” is all he says. He offers no defense of Nazareth, just an invitation to a personal encounter.

As the account unfolds, the interaction becomes increasingly peculiar. Nathanael accepts Philip’s invitation to “come and see” but it is Nathanael who is seen. We might imagine that his skepticism offers him a certain protection, a sense of the upper hand, when he experiences an encounter with the unknown and the seemingly inappropriate. But whatever Nathanael’s thoughts are as he arrives on the scene, he immediately becomes disoriented. Bewilderment replaces skepticism. Jesus sees him and makes this strange comment about him: “Behold, here is an Israelite indeed, one in whom is no guile!” (no deceit). A stranger’s introduction does not usually include sweeping pronouncements about one’s life.

Nathanael is puzzled and responds, *How do you know me? Who have you been talking to? Who has been talking about me?* With an explanation that leaves the reader possibly more puzzled than Nathanael, Jesus answers, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

These words elicit a strong response from the truthful, though initially skeptical, Nathanael. Quickly abandoning his posture of doubting inquirer, he proclaims, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel.” This response includes

an equally surprising set of pronouncements for an introductory encounter. From where did this confession, this insight, come? Nothing but an encounter with the divine could explain their mutual recognition and this unusual interchange of knowing and being known, seeing and being seen.

In 1 Samuel 3, we find ourselves in the midst of another strange first encounter. As a very young child Samuel was given to God by a grateful mother and left in the care of Eli, a priest at Shiloh. Eli's eyes, we are told, have grown dim, but it is not difficult for the reader to see that far more than Eli's eyes are in trouble. In the previous two chapters, we learn that his sons are out of control, and have been outrageous and irresponsible with the spiritual authority they've been granted. Furthermore, we read that Eli's spiritual perception is weak; he has mistaken Hannah's fervent prayer for drunkenness, and now, in this encounter, he is slow to realize that it is the Lord who is calling Samuel.

While being mentored by Eli, Samuel is an attentive student and responsive to Eli's requests and instructions. So when he hears his name called out in the night, the child runs to Eli in response. But Eli sends him back to bed and denies having called him. Again Samuel hears the voice, but Eli sends the child away with the same instructions. Samuel's night is interrupted a third time; dutifully, though perhaps with more reluctance, he again returns to Eli. This time Eli recognizes that this is not just a young boy caught in some pattern of troubling dreams, but a child to whom God is calling. Finally Eli helps him respond correctly, and Samuel, the bewildered child, is suddenly given very adult responsibilities.

In contrast to the infrequency of visions and words from the Lord in those days (verse 1), Samuel is visited with both a vision and a message in a single night. He does not have adequate categories with which to interpret the call, however, so Samuel turns to Eli in trust, and eventually Eli provides the needed interpretation.

Samuel is soon to be established as the rightful bearer of God's word and authority, one whose words God will not let "fall to the ground" (3:19). Now, as a child, he begins his development into a truthful prophet and priest by learning how to listen and respond. On their own, neither he nor Nathanael are able to interpret these strange encounters. Samuel doesn't recognize God's voice, and Nathanael is puzzled by Jesus' inauspicious origins, and then by his extraordinary capacity to know and to see. But both of them are portrayed as truthful, and the childlike innocence in Samuel is reflected in a description of Nathanael as an Israelite in whom there is "no

deceit.” No cunning, no spin, no dissimulation, just a purity of heart that helps open their eyes to see God.

These two figures stand in powerful contrast to those in Eli’s household. Religious structures and authority have become vehicles of personal gain and pleasure for Eli’s sons. Gross abuses of their institutional legitimacy have resulted in a betrayal of God’s call and trust. Eli is complicit in this terrible betrayal. Although he retains sufficient commitment to help Samuel encounter God, inadequate attention to his own household’s disregard for God and contempt for God’s people will ultimately prove fatal.

Encounters with God are often unpredictable. They catch us by surprise, interrupt our regular patterns and challenge our assumptions. Samuel’s first experience of God’s call and Nathanael’s first encounter with Jesus are unsettling, but both open into promises of deeper relationship and greater vision. Skepticism and inexperience are not barriers when they are accompanied by truthfulness and transparency. Perhaps Jesus had Nathanael in mind when he later taught, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”