

What's so special about a fig tree?

By [Diane Roth](#)

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One time at a women's retreat, I was asked to tell my call story. I told this woman the whole, convoluted story—about serving as a missionary in Japan, about being restless in my work and volunteering for leadership roles in my church, about discovering old journals where I had written about my desire to study theology, about my memory of sitting in church as a teenager and hearing the pastor give the sermon and saying, “If I was a man, that is what I would want to do.” I told her that it had taken me a long time, but I finally realized that God was calling me to be a pastor.

She was not impressed. The look on her face made this clear. She didn't quite come out and say, “Is that all you have?” but it was close. She was looking for a very particular kind of experience, with very particular criteria, and I did not have it.

I often wonder if Nathanael's friends felt the same way when he told them that he had found the Messiah, that he had become a follower of Jesus. “Guys, he saw me *under the fig tree*,” he tells them. “That's when I knew that he was the one.”

But what is so special about Jesus seeing you under a fig tree? In the scheme of things, it doesn't seem like that earth-shaking a sign. How could something as simple as this be all it takes to make Nathanael not just believe but declare that Jesus is the Son of God and King of Israel, even to drop everything and follow him?

Raymond Brown offers several possibilities for the meaning of the fig tree. Sometimes rabbis studied or taught under a fig tree, so perhaps Nathanael is a scribe or a rabbi. Or perhaps what Jeremiah thought is true: that the fig tree

represents the tree of knowledge in Paradise, so that Nathanael is confessing his sins to God under the tree and Jesus is assuring him that they are forgiven. Brown puts forth several other possibilities, but his last comment is what catches my attention: that all of them are pure speculation. We don't know, at last, the meaning of the fig tree—just that somehow, Nathanael has the sense that he is known by God, and this is enough.

Some of us have dramatic call stories. Some people can identify a moment when we were turned around and knew, just knew, who Jesus was and what exactly he was calling us to do. But some of us just have fig trees. We can't put our finger on it, but here we are, following Jesus for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in joy and in sorrow. We don't exactly know yet where we are going, but we are finding out, day by day.

What Jesus does promise us is that every single one of us will see greater things. We will see heaven opened and the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. We will see heaven and earth in one who inhabits our dreams and our days, who makes holy the stuff of our ordinary lives.

In the meantime, you had us at "fig tree."