The Chosen S2E2: I Saw You Memory Verse: John 1:49

September 22nd, 2024 Scripture Reading: Genesis 16:3-15

**SLIDE 1**

 Last week we became better acquainted with James and John who were brothers known as the “Sons of Thunder”. They had to have their prejudices challenged in the region of Samaria, a place filled with people who were considered to be unclean and rejected by God. In fact, these thunderous sons were ready to call down fire from heaven in order to punish some particularly offensive Samaritans. But Jesus had other plans. And he sternly, but gracefully filled these brothers in on what was in store. We summed it all up be saying that Jesus is looking for planters, not planners. God does not need us to make plans for him but he does ask us to be about the work of planting seeds for the future.

**SLIDE 2**

 In today’s episode, not much actually happens plan wise. As my daughter said, “They do a lot of waking and talking in this one.” She’s not wrong, but within these traveling scenes we are able to get a feel for what it might have been like to travel with Jesus. The filmmakers highlight tensions within the group and personality clashes between the disciples. Matthew, for example, desires to keep careful notes. He wants to record everything Jesus says. Simon comes by and makes it known that that is a terrible idea. Jesus has many enemies who want to catch him in his words. Why would you give them evidence that is so nicely curated? Simon, being the leader that he is, wants to organize this rag tag band of disciples and get everyone in their proper place doing their proper job. Jesus affirms his desire but cautions him it back off just a bit. One of the things that struck me about these “walking/talking” scenes was that these people who were following Jesus really had no idea what was coming next.
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At one point in the episode Mary Magdalene is seen packing up camp early in the morning and Ramah, a newcomer to the team, seems surprised. Mary explains, “I pack every morning now. I never know if I’ll be somewhere for a night or a week.” Ramah replies, “That sounds hard.” And Mary admits that everyone is struggling with the unknowns in some way. It is hard to not know what is coming. Expectations ease anxiety. We want to have some idea of what tomorrow brings.

 We want plans don’t we? Well laid out and accounted for and once that plan is in place, we need to stick to the plan. Our oldest son is just beginning his second year in college and my oldest daughter is a senior now. They are constantly having to think about plans. What do you want to do? Where do you want to go? How are you going to pay for it? There is an assurance that comes with a plan. As parents, we want to help out kids with their plans as best we can, but we ourselves don’t know all that we need to know in order to set up our Kids well. And anyway, in the end, we want them to follow, not our plan, not even their plan, but God’s plan for them. So often you will hear parents repeat the mantra, “We just want our kids to be happy, we want their plans to end in happiness.” This is a noble desire, and my wife and I have said the same at times, but we believe that God is interested in something more than our happiness. He has plans for us that roll over into eternity! And as is highlighted here in this episode, there is really only one question that matters…Who will you follow?

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Let us not forget the wisdom of Proverbs 16:9, “People plan their path, but the Lord secures their steps.” Of course, the message here is not that we should avoid planning but who will you follow? Whose plan will direct your life? What are you willing to give up?

**SLIDE 5-6**

In Luke 14:28 Jesus speaks with his disciples in what sounds like a lesson on the importance of planning. READ Luke 14:28-33. What began as advice about making plans became a warning about counting the cost. Mary and Ramah were feeling the price. They gave up a home, a standard schedule, their families…why? So they could sleep on the ground and restlessly wonder what was going to happen the next day? No, they gave it all up in order to follow the One who speaks the words of life, the One who has the perfect plan. And by the way, our CEB translation here softens the blow quite a bit. It uses the term unwilling. “None of you who are unwilling to give up all your possessions can be my disciple.” That is different from what was originally written. The word used is “abandon” and there is no “unwilling.” Jesus simply says,

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“All of you who do not abandon all of his possessions is not able to be a disciple.” If we plan to follow Jesus, we need to count the cost and actually pay that cost and not merely be willing. Following Jesus can cost us our comfort, our finances, our relationships. We ought to count the cost before we sign-up. In order to do that, we have to know that Jesus is worth it all.

 The rest of the episode establishes a backstory for a new disciple to the group, Nathanael. Now, we have one story, found in John chapter 1 that gives us any information about Nathanael, so the majority of what is built up around this character in the episode is just plausible speculation. But I want to make sure we take a good, hard look at the story as we find it in scripture. But before we turn to it, I wanted to share a strange quirk about Nathanael, or maybe it’s more of a quirk about John who wrote this gospel.

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Basically, in the bible, Nathanael goes by two names. John calls him Nathanael while the other gospel writers refer to him as Bartholomew. We may not know exactly why he goes by two names but an easy explanation would be that Son of Tolmai would be his sur name. So his full name would then be Nathanael Bar-Tolmai. Later in John’s gospel, Nathanael is said to have been from Cana, the same town where Jesus turned the water into wine.

So now, in chapter 1, John writes about it like this. And I am going to back up a little bit to a longer section, because when you read the whole section, we really get a feel for the cascading nature of how momentum was building. I’ll start at verse 35.

**SLIDE 9 (**READ John 1:35-51)

That’s the story and you can see the build-up happening. In this passage we see that in the span of 2-3 days Jesus went from zero to at least five disciples. Excitement was growing and Jesus himself says “You will see greater things than these!” But just as Jesus nicknamed James and John the “Sons of Thunder” he also referred to Nathanael as “The true one” . Jesus says in him there is not deceit, no guile. In fact the word used is *dolos* and it is also used when referring to bait, like when fishing or setting a trap. So a deceitful person is akin to bait in a trap. Nathanael, however is not like that. He has a specific type of character. What you see is what you get. He is true.

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The filmmakers portrayed this in the very beginning of the episode as they present Nathanael as an architect. In his line of work, Nathanael finds himself in an argument with a Roman foreman on a construction site. As words get heated Nathanael remarks, “Hey, “I’m just telling it like it is.” Jesus corroborates this trait in Nathanael who is the true one. Straightforward, honest…no bait. As his backstory continues, Nathanael is disgraced and his career ruined because of the accidental collapse of one of his buildings. Feeling forsaken by God and depressed about his future, Nathanael weeps and prays under a tree. He burns his blueprints and covers himself with the ashes. He cries out to God in prayer, “Do you see me?” Now these events are not in the bible. It’s a cleverly constructed backstory that probably leans into the drama too much but the idea of praying,

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 “Lord, do you see me?” is a sentiment reflected throughout scripture, especially in the Psalms which is Israel’s prayer book. In fact, in Genesis 16, a passage we read earlier, Hagar, Abraham’s Egyptian slave, after she became pregnant with Abraham’s son, she is treated so harshly by Abraham’s wife that she runs away into the wilderness. There in her loneliness and fear, God reveals himself to her. He promises to be with her and to bless her with many children. He tells her to name her son Ishmael, which means “God hears” and verse 13 is a very interesting one. Is says, “Hagar named the LORD who spoke to her, ‘You are El-Roi’” which means the God who sees me. Even a runaway Egyptian slave in the middle of the desert is seen by our God. If God can see Hagar, than God can see Nathanael and God can see you…no matter where you are, no matter what your struggle, you are known by God, he sees you. And he is not merely an unattached observer. God is not Big Brother in the sky recording like a security camera. He sees you as a Father sees his children. He weeps when you weep. He rejoices when you rejoice. He wants what is best for you. He has plans for you. He is El-Roi, the God who sees. And this all-seeing God has come in the person of Jesus. And Jesus sees Nathanael.

But Jesus does not just call Nathanael an honest man, but he refers to him as an honest Israelite.

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Israel was a new name that was given to the patriarch Jacob. “Jacob” means “heel grabber” or trickster, deceiver, someone who trips you up. And Jacob lived up to his name as he eventually tricked his own father at the expense of his twin brother. Due to the mess he had made, he too ended up running away into the wilderness. The Lord caught up with this heel grabber and sent an angel to wrestle with him. This wrestling match pretty much ended in a draw, and it was at this point he was given a new name, Israel, he who wrestles, or struggles, with God. I bring Jacob, or Israel, up here because Jesus does. He tells Nathanael, “you will see heaven open and God’s angels going up to heaven and down to earth on the Son of Man.” He is making a nod to a dream that Jacob had way back in Genesis chapter 29.

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Jacob lays down to sleep and dreams of a staircase going into heaven with angels ascending and descending. And in that dream, God makes himself known to Jacob. God makes promises to Jacob. He sees Jacob. He says that everyone will be blessed because of you and that he will always know God’s protection. Now Jesus stands before Nathanael, the anti-Jacob, the true Israelite, and he makes himself known. He says, “I saw you under the fig tree.” In other words, I saw you wrestling with God. I saw you living out the meaning of that name – a true Israelite. Nathanael knows at that moment, “Rabbi, you are God’s son. You are the King of Israel.” Nathanael gets it right on both counts. He hits on both the physical and spiritual realities of who Jesus is.

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Son of God and King of Israel. He is both the Eternal Creator who resides in unapproachable light as well as our personal Lord, our brother, our friend. The unknown God has ultimately become known through Jesus.

He sees us, he knows us, he asks us to follow him. How will we respond? Can we abandon it all for the sake of that call? Can we give up everything we have, including our family and friends, including our career and retirement, including our stuff, including our plans? Might we be willing to count it all as loss for the sake of Jesus? Would we at least be willing to wrestle with him? To sit under the tree and count up the cost? To decide, is it worth it? Is following Jesus worth it all? He is the man with the plan. We can follow him, the Son of God, the King of Israel or we can follow someone else. We can follow him or we can follow our own intuition. Who will you follow?

May we be like Andrew and Simon, Philip and Nathanael. When Jesus says, “I see you there, follow me,” may we be able to count up the cost and reply, “I will.” Amen.