

NOTHING BEATS THE REAL THING!

Text: John 1:43-51

China has grabbed the world's attention. The Chinese government mustered imperial effort to construct sporting venues and to beautify Beijing for the Olympics. The opening ceremonies were quite a show, weren't they? Like the little girl who opened her mouth and another girl's voice came out, or the computer-generated fireworks for the home viewers. They even cleaned up the air in Beijing by closing down the factories, and "encouraging" drivers to keep of the streets. As soon as the Olympics are over, it will be business as usual in China.

Host countries have always used the Olympics to tell fairy tales about themselves. But there's nothing imaginary about the gold medal performances of Michael Phelps and the US Men's basketball team. Nobody can touch them. It doesn't matter how high-tech your swimsuit is or how well-organized your fans are, or how much money your government poured into your training. All that matters is your performance on the day of competition.

In the same way, it doesn't matter how many cars pull into your church parking lot or how enthusiastically people rock in the aisles on a Sunday morning, or how warm a welcome we extend to visitors. God knows what's fake and what's real and in our reading for today he tells us that **nothing beats the real thing!** Nothing beats the real Messiah. Nothing beats a real disciple.

1. A real Messiah

We've opened our Bibles to the Gospel of John today. John kicks off his Gospel by tackling a controversial issue: Is Jesus God's Son? He starts off, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The "Word" he's talking about is Jesus, as he says, "and the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we beheld his glory, full of grace and truth." If you're still with me at this point of the sermon, that's good. Most people's eyes glaze over when they hear theological lingo like this. It's like listening to a mechanical engineer explain how an internal-combustion engine works – most of us don't really care, we just want to start up our car and go to WalMart.

So that's what the apostle John does here – he launches right into the story of another man named John – John the Baptist. John the Baptist plays a key role in answering the question, "Is Jesus for real?" But he's more than a campaign manager for Jesus. John the Baptist is a hatchet man, whom God sent to clear away all the false expectations that had grown up in the minds of the Jews. Expectations that nothing was going to stop them from ruling the world – not their enemies, not their own sinful weaknesses. Expectations of a revolutionary to lead a revolution that wasn't going to take place.

Many of them thought that John was the one. He was the first real prophet they had in four hundred years, a fire and brimstone, wild-eyed preacher who wasn't afraid to take on anyone. But John wasn't the real thing – Jesus was. One day Jesus walked by the place where John was baptizing and John said, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world...I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God." (John 1:29,34)

And the same thing happened the next day. But in spite of his endorsement, only two people went after Jesus – Andrew, and the Apostle John. And then Jesus left immediately and went to Galilee. Did you ever wonder why Jesus didn't hang around with John the Baptist a little longer, maybe to pick up some more disciples? It's not like John would have been jealous. The problem was with the Jews. In spite of John's preaching repentance, the Jews didn't get it. They didn't understand their real sinfulness, their real need for forgiveness, and that's why they didn't recognize the real Messiah when they saw him. It's like people that move here and can't understand why the football helmet with the "G" on it is black and red instead of green and gold.

Jesus had to start almost from scratch with a hand-picked core of disciples. One of them was Philip. He was from the same hometown as Andrew, and was his partner in the fishing business. Like Andrew, he was also follower of John the Baptist. But unlike Andrew, Philip didn't take his recommendation to follow Jesus. Perhaps Philip needed a little convincing. Our reading tells us that Jesus found Philip – Jesus didn't hold anything against him, he sought Philip out and said, "Follow me." And the next thing you know he says, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Remember that at this point Jesus hasn't done any miracles yet – no healings, no feeding of the 5,000, no raising the dead. Nevertheless Philip recognizes Jesus for who he really is. If the results from your blood work, your X-Rays and medical charts all indicate that you have bronchitis, your doctor wouldn't tell you that you have cancer, would he? And so by comparing Jesus' words with the Old Testament prophecies, Philip concludes: Jesus is the real deal.

The Jews' expectations of Messiah were as unrealistic as the country of Togo winning gold medals in every event. How realistic are our expectations? When John the Baptist started preaching, the Jews latched on to him so tightly that they missed out on the real Messiah. What do we latch on to? Our money, our entertainment, our health, our politics, things which count for nothing with God. Our biggest predicament however isn't getting the right guy in the Oval Office

or funding our retirement with skyrocketing energy costs eating up our paycheck. Our real concern is getting rid of our sins so that we can go to heaven – and only a real Messiah can help us. Only Jesus scored a perfect “10” in his obedience to God, his kindness to others, and in his suffering on the cross.

How would you like to be an athlete in this year’s Olympics swimming against Michael Phelps or playing basketball against Kobe Bryant and company? Even if you perform at your best, you have almost no chance of taking home the gold. We know that even on our best days, we still sin and that gets us a big goose egg from God. So why even try? It’s because nothing beats the real Messiah. He paid a real price for our sins, he crushed the devil and took away his power to drag us to hell, and he won a real victory that you and I will enjoy in heaven forever.

2. A real disciple

Today we’re observing the festival of St. Bartholomew. As I mentioned earlier, Bartholomew is the same disciple known as Nathanael, the man who John mentions in our reading for today. We really don’t know much about him, but that doesn’t really matter. What matters is that when Philip found the real Messiah, he acted like a real disciple and went looking for Nathanael to tell him the good news.

Nathanael however was a real skeptic. He says, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” In those days Nazareth was a town of no importance. Nobody important ever came from there. It was small, but unlike the small towns of Gettysburg or Manassas or Vicksburg, nothing important had ever happened in Nazareth. It’s not even mentioned in the Old Testament. It’s like the town of Arab, Alabama. Do you know what Arab is most famous for? The annual poke salad festival, which celebrates the nutritional value of the pokeweed plant – that’s right, it’s a weed that people eat. London, Paris, New York, and Arab, Alabama. It makes you laugh. And so Nathanael chuckled when Philip mentioned the Messiah and “Nazareth” in the same sentence. Jesus couldn’t be the Messiah. Everyone knew the Messiah was supposed to come from Bethlehem, the birthplace of King David.

Nathanael didn’t know that’s exactly where Jesus was born. He didn’t know much about Jesus, did he? But rather than argue with him, Philip simply said, “Come and see.” That’s always good advice whether you’re trying to convince your spouse to buy new furniture or your neighbor to come to church. “Come and check it out – what will it hurt?” So Nathanael went with Philip, not knowing exactly what to expect. But Jesus knew all about Nathanael. Before Nathanael can introduce himself Jesus says, “Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.” I don’t think Jesus is being sarcastic here. Even though Nathanael had his doubts, compare him with the Pharisees. They came to Jesus with trick questions, ready to plunge their daggers into him.

Jesus catches Nathanael off guard. He says, “How do you know me?” or in other words, “Have we met somewhere before?” And then Jesus blows him away. “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Jesus not only knew where Philip found him, he also knew about Nathanael’s skeptical response. But he knew even more than that. Jesus knew that years later in the Garden of Gethsemane, Nathanael would abandon him. Jesus knew Nathanael’s sins better than Nathanael himself, and yet Jesus doesn’t shred him to pieces, he doesn’t give him the stiff-arm.

Jesus tells him, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that.” Jesus is going to change Nathanael from a real skeptic into a real disciple. Nathanael may have been impressed that Jesus saw him under the tree, but he was going to need to see more than that to be a real disciple. And so on the third day after he died, Jesus rose and appeared alive to Nathanael and the rest of the disciples. Even though they abandoned him when he needed them the most, Jesus showed them that he forgave them. That’s the real power behind real disciples. The Bible doesn’t tell us what happened to Nathanael. There are legends about the countries he visited and how his enemies killed him. We don’t know, but Jesus knew and that’s all that mattered for Nathanael.

And we don’t what’s in store for us either. Are we going to stay healthy? Is the economy going to turn around? Is our church going to grow? I don’t know, but Jesus does. He knows who we’re going to marry, if we’re going to be married. He knows what our next job’s going to be and how much it’s going to pay. He knows what trials and burdens will follow us the rest of our lives. After the offering today, we’re going to officially install, or appoint our Sunday School teachers and our Board of Elders. How will they perform? We don’t know these things, we don’t know how well we’re going to handle ourselves, how faithful our witness will be. Looking at our past record isn’t too encouraging, is it? We may feel like fakes and frauds, but Jesus’ forgiveness makes us real disciples. Because of Jesus, nothing beats a real disciple.

Jesus told Nathanael, “I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” In English the word “you” is the same whether you’re talking to one or more people, but it’s not that way in Greek. Here Jesus uses the plural form of “you” – he’s speaking to you and me, too. We will see heaven open, we will see the angels of God ascending and descending on Jesus, answering once and for all that question, “Is Jesus the Son of God?” Don’t accept substitutes, because nothing beats the real thing. AMEN.