

January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2024

### **John 1:43-51 “Now You See It, Now You Don’t”**

When the boys were little our family had season passes to Busch Gardens in Williamsburg, Virginia which to this day we consider the best amusement park in the country. And I know that some of you might be thinking, “Well clearly they haven’t been to Disneyland.” Nope. We did indeed go to Disneyland during spring break of 2015. As we were standing in line for the Pirates of the Caribbean ride, we asked the boys how Disneyland compared to Busch Gardens. I believe it was Cameron who said, “Well, the production value is a little higher at Disneyland but it’s kind of boring compared to Busch Gardens.” We recently made a return trip to Busch Gardens just to see if the boys still thought it was more fun than Disneyland, or if the nostalgia of their childhood memories played a part in their comparison. Nope. Busch Gardens still won. In our estimation, Disneyland is sort of like visiting a national monument. It’s something to check off your bucket list of things to do if you live in the United States. But the judgement stood firm: Disneyland was boring compared to Busch Gardens. Some folks said, “Well, if you just went to the regular Disneyland Park then yeah, it might seem boring if you’re not a little kid. You need to go to the Disney California Adventure Park.” Okay, that may be the case, but you have to buy a separate ticket for that part of the park. Busch Gardens has everything you’d want in one much larger park. You want roller coasters? Busch Gardens has some of the best roller coasters in the country. Do a Google search for “top rated roller coasters in the US.” I challenge you to find any list that has a Disneyland or Disneyworld coaster with anything lower than a “Top 50” rating. Busch Gardens has several. You want nature shows? Busch Gardens has them. Beautiful scenery? It’s in the name. Busch *Gardens*. No matter what time of year, something is always blooming in the park. Music and entertainment shows? Every hour on the hour somewhere in the park there’s some sort of music or dance performance going on. Now this is where I have to pause and be brutally

honest with you. The shows are hit and miss at Busch Gardens. When they're good, they're great. When they're bad, they're awful.

On one of our last trips to Busch Gardens before we moved to California, Graham and I decided we wanted to go see a magic show in the same arena that, in the past, featured riveting productions like, "Vampires on Ice" which was every bit as fun as it sounds. At the time we were following Criss Angel, this rock-star looking magician who performed these spectacular illusions on a handful of TV specials. So we went to this magic show at Busch Gardens with some high expectations. "What do you suppose he's going to make disappear? An animal? A person? A car?" Sadly, the magician at Busch Gardens was no Criss Angel and the only thing he made disappear were the members of his audience who walked out mid-show. Most of his tricks were a variation of, "I'm thinking of a number." Graham turned to me and said, "This isn't magic. He's just really good at math." I do have to give the guy credit though. As someone who is terrible at math, I was pretty impressed with his tricks, but I certainly wouldn't join his fan club and follow him around wherever he performed.

By now you're probably thinking, "What does this have to do with the scripture Barbara read?" Good question. Because from a certain point of view, it looks like Jesus convinced Nathanael to be one of his disciples by impressing him with an underwhelmingly simple magic trick. And trust me, I know how borderline heretical that sounds, but hear me out. Last week, we looked at the Gospel of Luke's version of John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River. In Luke's gospel, Jesus' baptism was the conclusion of Jesus' birth story before he went on to prepare for his public ministry. John's gospel is much different than Luke's in this respect. There's no birth story here. John's gospel starts out way before Jesus' birth with, "In the beginning was the Word" and how this Word was the light of the world that shined in the darkness and how the Word became flesh and dwelled among us. Then the gospel writer shifts immediately over to Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River by John the

Baptizer who oddly enough was *not* identified as Jesus' cousin like he was in Luke's gospel. Another difference between John's gospel and Luke's gospel is that there is nothing here about Jesus going out to the sea of Galilee to invite Simon Peter to be his disciple. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell that version. Not John. There's no "I will make you fishers of men" in this gospel. It was much simpler. One of John's disciples named Andrew, along with another man whose name we don't know, saw Jesus get baptized then switched over to become his disciples. Then Andrew went home to tell his brother, Simon, "Hey, I found the Messiah." Andrew brought Simon to meet Jesus. Jesus said, "I'm going to call you Peter" and that was it. The next day Jesus went to Galilee and found Philip. He said, "Follow me" and now he had four disciples: Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip and a guy whose name we don't even know. Not very exciting, I know, but this is John's gospel. John puts all his energy into writing about Jesus the Cosmic Christ. So calling the disciples gets pushed to the side for the most part. Except when it comes to Nathanael. John is the only gospel writer that tells about how Nathanael became a disciple. And I've got to be honest; I wish that John would have given us a more detailed version of Jesus calling Peter like the other gospel writers did. I like the versions where Peter is out on the water fishing and was so impressed with Jesus that he dropped his nets on the spot and followed him. In John it's, "Hey Simon. I'm going to call you Peter" and that's it. John is always the oddball of the four gospel writers, so it's not surprising that he's focused on someone who the other three gospels barely mention. The biggest problem with Nathanael is when you try to summarize his story.

Jesus meets Philip and says, "Follow me." Philip agrees. Philip goes to see his brother Nathanael and says, "We found the messiah. He's from Nazareth." Nathanael says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip says, "Come meet him." When Jesus saw Nathanael he said, "Here comes an Israelite in whom there is not deceit!" Nathanael seems to be surprised. "Wait, how do you know me?" Jesus said, "I saw you under a fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael acts astonished. "What? How did you know I was standing under a fig tree? (Keep in

mind that this is the Judean countryside where every other tree is either an olive tree or a fig tree). Oh my gosh, you *are* the Son of God, the King of Israel!” I’m sorry, but honestly, I’m way more impressed with the math guy at Busch Gardens. Can you imagine how Nathanael might have reacted if Jesus said, “Pick a number between one and five hundred.” Or better yet, if he pulled out a poker deck and said, “Pick a card Nate. Any card.” Nathanael is what street magicians call an easy mark. A good hustler could’ve taken every shekel from Nathanael’s pocket playing three card Monty.

There is a certain psychology behind the art of illusion. A good illusionist often uses misdirection to convince their observers that they’ve discovered the solution to a trick. Once an observer has been convinced that they know how the trick works, they’re less likely to pay attention to clues that point to how the trick is really done. They’re distracted by looking for confirmation that their theory is correct. It’s like an illusionist who appears to make a coin disappear by passing it from one hand to the other. The observer assumes that it’s in the other hand. But when the illusionist opens the other hand to reveal that it’s empty, the observer says, “Whoa! It’s magic!” The reality is that the coin was palmed and it never even left the hand in the first place. Once we think we know what the solution is, it’s hard to consider or even notice alternatives.

Because John the Baptist was preparing the way for Christ by preaching and baptizing, people were convinced that all signs pointed to John being the messiah. They were so convinced that John was the one that they failed to recognize the One in their midst. Even after John corrected them and said, “No, I’m not the Messiah” there was still doubt that anything good could come out of Nazareth. And it wasn’t until John told his two disciples that Jesus *was* the One they were looking for that they made the decision to follow. It makes sense that people were disillusioned with who Jesus was. Jesus was unlike anything or anyone they had ever encountered before. Yet, like a good illusionist, Jesus wasn’t upfront about who or what he was. All he did was invite them to

come and see for themselves. These magician-like techniques are not meant to be deceptive though. They are meant to invite us into new possibilities and a new understanding rather than distracting us by our own conclusions or assumptions.

Some folks think they know who Jesus is. Some folks think they know who Christians are and what we're all about. They think they've figured us out because of what they've heard or seen on TV or what they've read in the paper or on social media. "Oh, yeah – I know all about these Christians. They're all self-absorbed, egotistical, judgmental, ignorant and hypocritical." No doubt, some of us are, and the media loves to point their cameras at the worst of us because, like a circus, the goofy clowns are often more interesting than the dancers. But I think most of us just want to follow Jesus and do our best to shine a little light into this world and encourage others to do likewise. And like John the gospel writer, we do this because we believe that Jesus is "the light of all people that shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it." If we expect people to understand this or maybe even join us in following the way of Jesus, we need to be mindful that our actions have got to match our words.

Georgeanne posted something on FaceBook the other day that resonated with me. It was a quote by Corey Booker.

"Before you speak to me about your religion, first show it to me in how you treat other people. Before you tell me how much you love your God, show me in how much you love all God's children. Before you preach to me of your passion for your faith, teach me about it through your compassion for your neighbors. In the end, I'm not as interested in what you have to tell or sell as I am in how you choose to live and give."

As Jesus said to Nathanael, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these!" So let us come and see.