In at least one way, I think of myself as a very odd Christian! In one respect, I think other Christians look at me and conclude that I am a strange kind of pastor. You see, for reasons of my own, I have absolutely no desire to visit modern-day Israel. I feel no longing to walk the streets of Nazareth or Capernaum that Jesus walked so many years ago. I don’t want to sail on the Sea of Galilee as Jesus so often did with his disciples. It would not mean much to me to stand in places where Jesus is supposed to have stood in ancient Jerusalem. I guess I think I should want all these experiences, or at least I guess other people think I should want them. But just being in places where Jesus was does not appeal to me.

That does not mean, however, that I would not want to have been with Jesus in those places during his earthly ministry! I think about that many times and often wish I could have been with him. In fact, our sermon text is one of those times. As I read the account, I wish it had been me standing at the Jordan River and not Nathanael.

By all accounts, Nathanael was a good man. He is presented as a devout Jew, one eagerly looking forward to the coming Messiah. And he was willing to do more than just wish for it. When he heard that a prophet had appeared in Judea, preaching a baptism of repentance in preparation for the Messiah, he took time off work, made a three-day journey, and found John the Baptist.

If there was any chance that the Messiah was near, he had to check it out for himself. He lived in the hope that he would be privileged to know the Messiah! One day, Philip came to him, all excited. He claimed he had seen the Messiah! He had met the Messiah! He talked to the Messiah! Nathanael could scarcely believe his ears - it seemed too good to be true! All Philip could do was to say: *Come and see!*

When Nathanael was barely in hearing distance, he heard Jesus talking about him, in some detail! It seemed as if Jesus already knew him! When he asked Jesus about that, he could hardly have been prepared for Jesus’ answer: *I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you. I saw you,* Jesus said. *I knew who you were long before you got here. I knew what you were saying and to whom you were saying it. I know everything about you!*

The effect of these words on Nathanael was profound. **Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.** Nathanael was absolutely convinced that Jesus was the Mess. He felt confident that Jesus was his Lord and Savior. He felt entirely comfortable in committing himself into Jesus’ care because he knew that Jesus had seen him, was familiar with every part of him, and would personally care for him.

And that is what I would like to receive from Jesus! I would like to know that Jesus saw me, that he really and truly knows me, inside and out. I would like to have the feeling that he knows my strengths and is willing to help me in my weaknesses, no matter what challenges life may throw at me. I would like to have the assurance that he knows all my needs and will supply them, when it is necessary.

I would like to have the comfort of knowing he is always with me - that he is aware of all my words and actions, and will involve himself in my life. I would like to have the
peace of the warm, personal relationship Nathanael had with Jesus. But am I too late? Were we born in the wrong place and time to have that for ourselves? Have we missed out? Can Jesus see us, know us, and care for us as he did Nathanael?

The answer is Yes! Jesus is not here to do that in person, we understand that. And we know we will meet him face to face on Judgment Day. But he is left these words behind to assure us, beyond a doubt, that he sees us, he knows us, and he cares about us on the most personal and intimate level.

Ephesian 1 tells us: God chose us in Christ Jesus before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. Jeremiah 31 tells us: The Lord says: I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness. In 2 Thessalonians 2: From the beginning God chose you. Or Isaiah 43: This is what the Lord says - he who created you, he who formed you: I have called you by name; you are mine.

We can scarcely imagine it, but this is what the Lord tells us about our relationship to him. It did not begin at some point in our lives, at our Baptism, or even at our birth. You and God go way back - back to the eternity before time began, before the universe existed, before there was anything but God and only God. That is when he first saw you, saw me!

Looking through the multitudes of human beings living hundreds and thousands of years in the future, his eye fell upon you and me and a decision was made. We would be his own! No matter what it might take, he would make certain that he would bring us to be with him. Before there was anything else, there was love for you and me that would never die, never grow tired of you, never cast you aside!

Lest we think that when he looked through the lens of time God got a blurry picture of us and might not have chosen us, if he had seen us clearly, he tells us this: Fear not, for I have redeemed you! God did not choose us, only to discover later that we were sinners. The Lord knew this all too well and made his choice with the commitment to be our Redeemer!

God chose us in Christ Jesus before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. He chose us at the same time he chose his one and only Son to become a true man to be the Messiah that Nathanael so longed to see. His holy, precious blood would pay the ransom price and buy us back from sin, death, and Satan. He would redeem our life with his own life, our death sentence would be served by him. He would make us holy and blameless in the sight of God.

Not only that, from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and through belief in the truth. The Lord promised to send the Holy Spirit to work saving faith in our hearts, that is, give us the ability not to reject the redemption, which is his free gift to us all. Clearly the Lord saw us as we were, knew what he was getting into when he chose us, and cared enough to do everything necessary to keep us as his own!

That personal attention, however, does not end with his promise of eternal life in heaven. Because we are his own, he tells us that his care for us is there every single day! To comfort us in this life, he often compares himself to a shepherd and us to his sheep! He teaches us to say: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for
you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

We are not numbers to the Lord. We are not an anonymous face in a sea of faces. We are not projects he checks in on once in a while. He has created us as individuals and cares for us as individuals. He knows us personally, intimately, thoroughly. He is aware of everything that goes in within and around us. He knows what we need in every circumstance of life. And he meets those needs!

He promises every earthly blessing we have to have, neither too much or too little. When spiritual enemies attack, the rod of his Word beats them back; when earthly enemies make our lives difficult, he defends us with the staff of his love. Indeed, as we walk through life, his goodness and love is always with us. And as we enter the shadow of death, he does not desert us. I am with you always, he tells us.

He has already died - he knows the way through this valley and will carefully guide us in the way that leads us to our heavenly home. There, the relationship begun in eternity will find its conclusion in eternity. I saw you, the Lord says, I have always seen you, and in heaven, we will see him forever! Amen.

Pastor Keith Bilitz
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Alma City
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Smiths Mill