

The question: “What do you know?” is often part of a typical Midwestern greeting. For example I might say, “Barb, good to see you! What do you know?” as a way to find out what’s new, or what’s going on in her life. The question invites a sharing of information. But Barb might share something that prompts me to say, “What do you know!” – this time not as a question, but as a reaction of surprise. Because what I thought I knew about something could turn out to be faulty information. And really, what we claim to “know” about many things can be subject to change. But we still tend to resist change. And we don’t usually like admitting we’ve been wrong about something we claimed to “know.”

So our ears perk up when someone declares, “This is what I know.” And we immediately turn on our own personal “fact checker” mindset to screen what they say they “know” against what we believe that we “know.” If what they say aligns with what we “know” – then we think they “know” what they are talking about. But if what they say challenges or contradicts what we “know” – we might feel justified in discounting what they have to say. . . . Or we could be troubled by what they say. And we might even start to wonder if we could be wrong about what we thought we knew in light of what they claim to “know.”

When we read the passage from the first chapter of the Gospel of John and hear John testify to what he knows about Jesus – his clear statements can startle us. Of course I don’t think any of us would be as profoundly startled by his statements as the first people who heard John. Those were people who had been following John, who were his disciples, who had heard John call people to repentance, to prepare the way of the Lord, for some time. But then one day John pointed at Jesus and said: “Here he is, God’s Passover Lamb! He forgives the sins of the world! . . . my task has been to get Israel ready to recognize him as the God-Revealer. . . . I watched the Spirit, like a dove flying down out of the sky, making himself at home in him. . . . I know nothing about him except this: The One who authorized me to baptize with water told me, ‘The One on whom you see the Spirit come down and stay, this One will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ That’s exactly what I saw happen, and I’m telling you, there’s no question about it: *This* is the Son of God. . . . Here he is, God’s Passover Lamb.” John must have spoken with such absolute certainty that upon hearing his testimony, two of John’s disciples got up, left John, and followed after Jesus. . . . Actually it doesn’t say the disciples left to follow Jesus the *first* time they heard John testify about Jesus; but when John spoke up again the very next day, two disciples couldn’t ignore him – because John was the kind of guy who consistently stayed on message. For as long as they had known John he had talked about “the One who is greater than I will come” – but now John was saying “the One” has come. That was what John and his disciples had been waiting for – right?!

But think about it. Think about what it would take to compel *you*, a close disciple of John, to not only hear and believe what John says he knows about Jesus, but to then physically get up, turn your back on John, and go to follow after Jesus. To turn away from your spiritual leader, your teacher who has been guiding you – to follow someone else. Someone you don't even know. Could you make such a sudden and dramatic change? Most people wouldn't do that, would they? . . . Or would they do it if they already had **complete trust** in John? And because they trust him completely they believe that if John says he KNOWS that *Jesus* is the Son of God, well then they have to believe that Jesus probably is the Son of God!

But for every Andrew, Peter, or Philip who chose to follow Jesus there had to have been dozens of other people around who heard John, and who saw Jesus – but who didn't turn and follow after Jesus. The gospels talk about how droves of people were coming from all over to be baptized by John. So how many other disciples of John didn't get up and follow Jesus? Even John himself – who knew what he knew – didn't get up and follow Jesus. Was it really enough for John to only prepare the way, to help others to recognize Jesus as the God-Revealer? Why didn't John shift from preparing the way to following Jesus? Or did John somehow understand that the people who were already following John would just keep following John – even if John followed Jesus? That these people would continue to tag along with John without making the choice, or commitment, to follow Jesus of their own volition? That they needed to see Jesus for themselves – and that wouldn't happen if they only saw Jesus through John's eyes and John's testimony? It's like John chooses to stay a distinct distance AWAY from Jesus so people have to choose who they will follow. But John also continues to point to Jesus and to testify to what he knows about Jesus.

And then there is Nathanael. Philip testifies to Nathanael, “We've found the One Moses wrote of in the Law, the One preached by the prophets. It's *Jesus*, Joseph's son, the one from Nazareth!” And after hearing Philip's testimony Nathanael can't believe it. Because Nathanael knows that Nazareth is NOT the kind of place that anyone would expect the Messiah to come from! He's amazed that Philip would even suggest that God's Anointed One would come from such a poor, small town. This must be a joke! Come on, Philip, stop kidding around! But Philip doesn't try to convince Nathanael that he's serious. Philip has already tried to put into words what he has come to know about Jesus. So all Philip has left to say is: “Come, see for yourself.” It would now be hard for Nathanael NOT to do just that – because the only way Nathanael can be sure this Jesus is NOT God's Anointed One is to see him for himself. So he goes with Philip. Nathanael's never met Jesus before. And Jesus has never met him. So how could Jesus take one look at Nathanael as he's walking toward him and claim that he sees Nathanael is a man of integrity, without a false bone in his body? How could Jesus seemingly “know” Nathanael inside and out, and that he saw what Nathanael was doing long before Philip ever went to talk to him?

The writer of Psalm 139 says that's the kind of stuff God can do and the kinds of things that God knows about us. That God can read us like an open book; and knows our thoughts – even from a distance. That nothing about us can be hidden from God. . . . And in this encounter with Jesus, Nathanael perceives that if Jesus can do the same things that God can do, then Jesus must be the Son of God! And then Jesus tells Nathanael, “You haven't seen anything yet!” So how could Nathanael NOT stick around to find out if he would indeed “see heaven open and God's angels descending to the Son of Man and ascending again”?! Would you want to miss something like that?! It's like Jesus gave Nathanael an invitation to live into Jacob's vision of seeing the ladder, or staircase, that extends from earth to heaven with the angels continually going up and down on it. Only Jesus says the angels will be going back and forth between Jesus on earth and God in heaven. I don't think Nathanael wanted to pass up seeing something like that. I “know” I wouldn't. I hope you will also choose to continue to follow Jesus and stay alert to the amazing things that can happen when we're with the Son of God.

Amen.