

To see as a child: John 1:43-51

by [Cynthia Anderson](#) in the [January 13, 2009](#) issue

When I was a child, my mother and aunt would go Christmas shopping together. At the end of the day, I would beg them to take me to the park near the shopping district. There, nestled in a dark grove of trees, we'd find a life-size nativity, carefully illumined with spotlights from within the stable. As a child I thought it glorious to walk slowly through the ominously dark park and then suddenly find myself in a place that was as bright as day. I stood with Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the angels in front of the baby in a feed trough, and it seemed to me that they turned their gaze, looked directly at me and invited me in.

I was transfixed by all of it and would stand there as long as I could. I sensed that God had come into the world and that everything had changed. So I was surprised that so few people were there and that when other families did come by they stopped, allowed their children a moment to take a glance, and then left. They didn't seem to see what I saw, and although I wanted them to stay and share the glorious experience, I had no words that could compel them to linger.

In Epiphany we reflect on the ways in which God's light in the Son has entered the world, and how the light continues repeatedly to show itself to us. We're invited to see this light and challenged to consider the ways in which we can bear witness to it. But it's a troublesome concept in our culture. Our gaze is stuck to the neon glare of technologically manipulated images, and the pursuit of truth, beauty and goodness seems dimmed.

How do we who proclaim that the light has come into the world point to this light when it seems obscured by the world's cynicism and by our own failures to allow it to enlighten our lives? We are preoccupied with techniques and technological innovations that are intended to make the message relevant and the light visible. But I still find myself wanting others to come and see this amazing thing that has come to pass, and then feeling the lack of words or skill to persuade them to linger.

Perhaps this story from John is the encouragement we need. Jesus shows up in Galilee and finds Philip, who accepts the invitation to follow him. Philip in turn goes

to find Nathanael and invites him to come and see the one about whom Moses and the prophets have written. Perhaps Nathanael is reluctant to leave work and a busy schedule to go see some preacher who's filling his friend's head with who knows what nonsense. John tells us that Nathanael is less than impressed with Philip's description of this Jesus—he's from Nazareth, of all places. Perhaps Nathanael doesn't expect much. He's like those parents who reluctantly yield to a child's plea to go and see a plaster nativity in a cold, dark city park. They don't expect much either. They're in a hurry. In all likelihood, Nathanael intends to exchange a polite greeting, spend the few minutes required for courtesy, and then return to his planned day.

But it all changes once Nathanael comes into Jesus' presence. If we read the story carefully, it can reshape our understanding of how the light penetrates the darkness and how we help others see. What changes Nathanael's life isn't Philip's persuasive description of Jesus; it's not even Nathanael's observation of Jesus. It is not what Nathanael sees about Jesus that changes things, but what Jesus sees about Nathanael. Being seen and known by Jesus turns this ordinary encounter into a life-changing experience that opens Nathanael to the light that's come into the world to reveal heaven itself. The story shifts our focus away from our efforts to get others to see Jesus and reminds us that we are able to see only because God has first revealed God's self to us. We see because we have been seen, and love because we have first been loved. In Jesus, we can trust that God sees us, and in the redemptive line of God's sight, we have new life.

At this point, Philip all but disappears from the scene. But he has completed his task: he invited Nathanael to come and see and then walked with him to Jesus. At that point, Philip trusted the light to penetrate the darkness.

Those of us who are followers of Jesus in a highly skeptical if not downright hostile environment can learn from Philip, who reminds us that our calling is to bear witness with grace and obedience to the light that shines on our lives through the Son of God. The ability of others to see that light does not rest solely on our powers of theological persuasion, our skills of rhetoric or technology, our ability to communicate in culturally relevant ways or even our sheer persistence. Rather, the ability to see Jesus comes as a gift from God through the graceful and mysterious movements of the Holy Spirit. We can take others by the hand, share our excitement with them and invite them by the faithful living of our lives to come and get a glimpse of what we've seen—but we cannot make them see.

We make sure that our lives are pointed toward the light and then live in the daring trust that the light shines and the darkness will not overcome it.