



ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS
CELEBRATING 200 YEARS

THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

1 SAMUEL 3:1-20
1 CORINTHIANS 6:12-20
JOHN 1:43-51
PSALM 139:1-5, 12-17

A SERMON BY THE REV. ANDREW ANCONA
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In today's Gospel we read of the calling of Phillip and Nathanael. Nathanael is found while he sits under a fig tree, by Philip who is with Jesus and the other disciples.

Philip finds Nathanael at the start of Jesus' ministry, in fact it has not yet begun. Still, Philip calls to Nathanael and says, "We have found him - the one foretold by the prophets! We have found Jesus of Nazareth" I wonder if you can hear the excitement in Philip's voice? Nathanael's response is somewhat underwhelming, he asks a simple question: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

When I read this passage from the Gospel of John, and particularly this sentence, I'm not always sure what Nathanael might have meant by his question? So this week I did some digging. Can anything good come from Nazareth? What could such a question mean?

Well, as it turns out in Jesus' day, Nazareth was a very very small town, perhaps more of a village than anything else. It was not a place of reputation though it did have enough buildings to at least be on the map. Otherwise, there was not much written, and not much to be said about Nazareth in Jesus' day. It appears to have been overlooked by most people of the day, and was not a particularly special or

noteworthy place. It certainly was not considered among the important places of Judea. It had no notable history or part in the story of God and Israel thus far, it was *the* Podunk town of Ancient Palestine.

If we think about Nathanael's question in the context of the Gospel we see that he is responding to Phillip's claim that he and the other disciples have found the Messiah. Nathanael's question here, is based in his understanding of the prophetic culture and tradition of Jesus' time. Where you're from, is as much of a reputation as any. Where you're from is as good a prophecy towards the work, vocation, and destiny that lies ahead as any. Your hometown - your place - is your identity. So for that matter, how *can* anything good come from Nazareth, let alone the good news of the Messiah's arrival? How can it be that something so great, comes from something, someplace or someone so small and without repute?

Nathanael here is a skeptic - a cynic. Even if he believes in the prospect of the Messiah, he lacks the faith to see the possibility of God's anointed one in such a place as Nazareth.

Jesus challenges the assumptions of the disciples, even in the face of rejection. Likewise, Jesus invites us to challenge our own expectations, to be witnesses to the coming of God to those places where we least

expect to meet him, amidst the unremarkable, amidst the overlooked, amidst the forgotten and the lowly.

Jesus' ultimate answer to the disciples in this story reminds us that the people, places and things we turn into God, the myths and images of in our minds that prevent us from walking the path to God's freedom, justice, and peace are idols. A concocted vision of God that meets our own expectations, and serves our own wills and desires, is idolatry. But true witness to the work of the God's Kingdom in Christ's example is faith, and that is the faith which we are called to, the faith we are invited to be a part of.

“You will see greater things than these.”

Even as we ourselves feel overlooked, unremarkable, and lowly at times, we are invited to remember that all is seen and known and loved by God. In God, we are called to a faith that reminds us that where, what, and who is often overlooked by the norms and expectations of our society and culture, becomes what is precious in the sight of God.

Nazareth represents everything this world has rejected, and everything which is of God, and everything that will lead us to God that the world will continue to reject. And yet, while Nazareth represents all those people, places, and things which are

overlooked, it has been embraced by God. It is the place where God chose - to live, to grow, and to prepare to walk the path of salvation among us. Nazareth is a witness to the promises of God, who chooses to lift up what appears to be unremarkable and lowly instead of exalting what is powerful and mighty in our eyes.

When I think of Nazareth, I think of how different it must have been compared to this city of New York. Where Nazareth is small, New York is mighty! Where Nazareth is quiet, New York is loud (even in the late days of this pandemic I think!). Where Nazareth was Jesus' home, New York City is ours.

Yet when I think of Nazareth, I think of New York, and I wonder if Nathanael would still ask the same question. Despite some major differences, perhaps Nazareth and New York aren't that different after all, especially now.

I gather that Nazareth in Jesus day was also a messy, smelly, place, where sometimes it was also hard to know the presence of God amidst the daily grind of life - amidst the threat of occupation and violence, amidst the threat of sickness, amidst the work to be done at home day in and day out. Perhaps we would not assume this city, to also be graced by the very presence and Good news of God?

Beloved, in our present time to Come and See is our hope. This is also hope that we are called to share. To come and see is now the precise task of our discipleship, as witnesses to the Gospel, and as evangelists in this place.

Come and See is now both the invitation we receive, and the invitation we are called to give, and it should remind us of the centrality of our call as Christians, to disrupt the harmful and stifling expectations, norms, and assumptions in our own current culture of political violence, racism, greed, selfishness, judgement and death, by proclaiming the Good News.

Beloved I wonder, what “greater things” might we be witness to if we were bold enough to not only come and see for ourselves, but to also proclaim the Gospel by invitation, by witness, by example to the people of this city without hesitation, without the constraints of our own assumptions. What greater things might we be witness to, when we witness the life and ministry of Jesus especially in the lives of those in need of God’s love, peace, and justice.

What greater things might we witness, if we mustered up the faith and the courage to preach the Gospel by invitation, and by witness amongst those who have not known the same Christ that we do.

Nathanael tells his truth in a way - the plan of God as he sees it according to the perspective of this world, the Gospel according to Nathanael, perhaps, when he asks his question. *Nothing good* can come from Nazareth, he seems to say.

However, we know the truth that comes from God. So let us remember The Good News of Christ, the Gospel of the Lord: *that is what good* came from Nazareth, and this is what good can come from among us too, from the lives of faith we share in this place: lives where we come and see, where we are witnesses to and participants in the true presence and workings of God's peace, justice, and love through and among us in new and unexpected ways. Beloved not just anything good came from Nazareth, but the One who is Good came from Nazareth, to bring us all things back into life with God: who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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