

Anything Good?
John 1:43-51
January 17, 2021

These are difficult and somber days for our nation. We live in the wake of mob violence at our national Capitol. We live with the threat of protest, terror, and violence across our fifty states. The cloud of racism that has been insidious since our country's beginnings has been exposed for the evil that it is. And yet the horror inflicted upon Black, Indigenous, and People of Color cannot be easily or cheaply rectified. There is not unanimity about the need to right the wrongs of the past. We live in the face of great division, which is threatening the well-being of individuals and wreaking havoc in our communal life.

Jesus lived at a time of when the multitudes were likewise oppressed at the hands of the powerful. As God's representative, Jesus came to establish a reign in which the lives of the most vulnerable are respected and valued. Today's reading from the gospel of John finds Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, calling the disciples as the core leaders of his ministry. With a simple invitation, "Follow me," Philip joins Jesus. His enthusiasm is evident as he finds Nathanael and announces, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the law and the prophets, Jesus, Joseph's son of Nazareth." Nathanael shares his skepticism, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

The question can be heard in at least two different ways. We can hear the sarcasm, with prejudice tucked away in the question. Nazareth was an unremarkable, obscure, poor village on the northern border of Palestine. Most southern Jews regarded Nazareth with contempt. The question might also be genuinely honest, even curious, for the Old Testament has no mention of Nazareth. How could Jesus be the Promised One if his hometown is not even mentioned in scripture?

Our current climate prompts us to consider the possible prejudice in the question. I've been thinking a lot about my Nazareths: the people, places, and situations that I had no right to judge, question, or label, but I did, and sometimes still do. I've wondered about the ways I've belittled, demeaned, and rejected the Nazareths in my life. I'm sure that I lost more by their absence from my life. And I wonder how many times I've missed the Messiah's presence because I refused to look toward Nazareth.

Perhaps you have also had Nazareths in your lives. They are the objects of our judgment, assumptions, labeling, and exclusion. They are the people, places,

and situations from which we neither expect nor see the possibility of anything good coming, certainly nothing useful or beneficial to us. Nazareth is about how we see and relate to others, whether in foreign policy or in our own homes.

Nathanael's question is asked every day. Current versions might be: Can anything good come out of our current national chaos? Can anything good come out of Washington? Can anything good come out of the immigrant, the foreigner, the stranger? Can anything good come out of the Black Lives Matter movement? Can anything good come out of the people and relationships that have hurt me? Can anything good come out of the broken, difficult, or painful places in our lives? Can anything good come out of the parts of ourselves that we dislike and reject?

Nathanael's question isn't really about Nazareth. It's about Nathanael. The same is true for all of us, whoever or whatever our Nazareth might be. The question is about our beliefs and unbeliefs in others, ourselves, and God. It's about our biases, prejudices, and fears. It's about our wounds, losses, and sorrow. It's about our guilt and shame. It's about the assumptions and judgments we make. It is about all the many filters through which we see the world, others, ourselves, and God.

Let's look at another way of interpreting Nathanael's question - as one of genuine curiosity. The idea of the Messiah coming from a totally unexpected place is surprising. What does that say about God? What if God chooses to reveal God's self through the stranger, the one who is different, the other? What if God comes as one who is poor, powerless, and has no place to lay his or her head?

For us Nazareth is a blind spot. It is a hardening of our heart. For God, however, Nazareth is a place of epiphany, a place of revelation where God shows up in the person of Jesus. God comes and invites us to see, to believe, and to love in new ways. That's what happened to Nathanael. He accepted Philip's invitation to "come and see." In doing so, Nathanael was seen and known by Jesus, who recognized his integrity. Nathanael is so stunned by Jesus' intimate knowledge of him that he professes that Jesus is the Son of God, the King of Israel. Something good, something amazing, something astonishing can come out of Nazareth after all!

This is an epiphany for Nathanael. He recognizes that God is in a place and a person that he never expected possible. He was willing to get up and leave where he was. He let go of one belief to take up a new belief. He left behind his certitudes about Nazareth to give his attention to something different, something

unexpected. He left a former self to take a journey into the depths of a new life shaped by Jesus.

Jesus offers the invitation to us, "Come and see." For every one of our Nazareths there is always an invitation to "come and see." It is an invitation to get up and move to a new place, to leave behind our assumptions and judgments, to give up our convictions, to see with the eyes of our heart, to recognize the image of God in another, and to be surprised by God. It is an invitation to see as Jesus sees Nathanael, as a child of God born in original blessing. Jesus could have said of Nathanael, "Here is a skeptic who is governed by prejudice." But Jesus looked past the layers that had built up around Nathanael's core & saw an honesty, a purity of thought and intention at core of his character.

What might happen to the divisiveness in our nation if we see one another as Jesus sees us? What if we look beneath the surface of the Nazareths or Nazoreans that we have formerly discounted? Instead of assuming that "nothing good" can come of multiple national crises we are experiencing, what if we accept invitation to come & see. What are the hopes and needs of those whom we have labeled as "other"? Some of our members are involved with Braver Angels, an organization w purpose of depolarizing America. This kind of work helps us humanize one another.

Our nation is in need of reinventing itself. A part of this massive task is up to each of us as we do our own internal work to examine our Nazareths, our prejudices, biases, and move toward curiosity and willingness to listen and understand. May we approach one another with curiosity, interested to see and understand, and to find something good, even something surprising, something of God.

Holy Presence, we give thanks for your Son Jesus who continues to invite us into relationship with You. We are grateful for the Body of Christ on earth today, your Church. Encourage your church to be a bold and faithful witness to the message of Christ today, speaking truth, expressing love, and kindling hope.

We confess that we have often looked at others with judgement or prejudice. Forgive our narrow-mindedness. Grant us courage to recognize those ways in which you call us to grow, to own our shortcomings, to uproot our bias.

Awaken our nation to the errors of its ways in which we have trampled upon the poor and vulnerable. Arouse our conscience and move us toward action the changes systems to benefit the well-being of all. We pray for calm during this week, that there might be a respectful transition of leadership.

We pray for the multitudes who are suffering from Covid-19; offer your presence of encouragement. Blanket with solace families who are grieving the death of loved ones. Abide with all who are struggling with physical, emotional, or spiritual health concerns.

Grant resilience to small business owners, employees, and the unemployed who are struggling to survive in this challenging environment.

Along with the first disciples of Jesus, we are eager to come and see your wondrous work in the world. Receive our desire to participate in growing your reign of justice and peace. Provide opportunities for us to live in to your creative ministry.

We pray in name & way of JC, as he taught us to pray, Our Father....

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