

January 17, 2021
John 1:43-51

Epiphany 2
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“One of *Those* People?”

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

“Can anything good come out of South Plainfield?”

I used to have a problem with people from South Plainfield. I grew up in North Plainfield, and so our two communities were long-time traditional rivals. Our annual high school football game was the highlight of the season, with the stands packed with fans cheering not only for our side to win but for the other side to lose badly. The rivalry continued throughout the year, not only in sports events but in almost any activity that involved both communities. It even extended to churches; St. Peter’s in North Plainfield and St. Stephen’s in South Plainfield would compete in local church softball leagues, and the games often ended in heated arguments. If a boy and a girl from the opposing schools began dating, there would be a scandal rivaling the Capulets and Montagues. I could not imagine being friends with anyone who had anything to do with our hated rival.

But my perspective on our opponent changed during my second year at university when I became friends with Craig. He was pre-med major, so I did not have much contact with him during our first year when his courses followed a different curriculum from mine. In our second year, all students needed to take an elective in English literature, so we found ourselves in a class where we would read such diverse texts as Beowulf, the Canterbury Tales, and A Modest Proposal. As we got to know each other, we discovered that we had similar interests; we were both Yankees fans (which was rare in the Philadelphia area), we both liked Bruce Springsteen, and we had both spent time on the boardwalk at Seaside Heights. We also seemed to share a similar sense of humour and would often make each other laugh. We soon began to eat meals together and hang out watching games in the student union. Craig quickly became one of my best friends; but this became a dilemma when one day we got talking about our hometowns, and to my shock I found out that Craig was from South Plainfield. I saw a similar look of surprise when I told him I was from North Plainfield; I am sure he had similar opinions of his hometown’s traditional rival as I did of mine. Fortunately, this revelation did not affect our friendship, but it did force me to rethink my perspective on people from the other side, and how often our opinions of other people is forced by where they are from or how they appear rather

than who they are.

The North Plainfield – South Plainfield rivalry was mostly confined to the football field and friendly banter between rivals; but sadly, looking upon others with suspicion, contempt, and even hatred has been a cancer that has caused untold harm across the centuries. Too many wars, too much violence has been fomented by negative attitudes by people on “the other side,” be this those who live on the “other side of the tracks,” or in neighbouring communities or countries, or people of a different religion or ethnic heritage. Looking down upon “the other” has led to the horrors of ethnic cleansing, apartheid, caste systems, racial violence, and genocide. In his prophetic words from *South Pacific*, Oscar Hammerstein II warned that “*you’ve got to be taught to hate and fear, you’ve got to be taught from year to year, it’s got to be drummed in your dear little ear, you’ve got to be carefully taught.*”

There is evidence of such suspicion of people from the “other side” in Nathanael’s response to Philip’s declaration in today’s Gospel lesson, where Jesus is in the process of gathering his disciples: “*The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’*” (John 1:43). This invitation is at the heart of the call to discipleship, which means one leaves everything behind in order to follow Jesus. Philip (who is from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter, the first two disciples called by Jesus) in turn finds a man named Nathanael and witnesses to what he has experienced: “*We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.*” (1:45). Little is known about Nathanael; he does not appear in any of the other Gospels and is absent from the lists of the Twelve. We also do not know the nature of his relationship with Philip; but evidently the relationship is of such a nature that Philip decides to make the Nathanael the first person to whom he witnesses to Jesus as the fulfillment of Scripture (“*about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote*”) and whom he identifies in the way one commonly distinguished one person from another at that time, by naming his father (“*Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth*”). He values his relationship with Nathanael so greatly that he wants him to experience the joy Philip has received in his call to be a disciple of Jesus.

But for the first time in the Fourth Gospel, testimony to Jesus is met with resistance: “*Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’*” (1:46). Nathanael was from Cana, and his dismissal may reflect a rivalry between his hometown and the hometown of Jesus; people from the most sophisticated city of Cana may have looked down upon the small-town residents of Jesus’ community. To Nathanael, the very notion that the one who is the fulfillment of God’s promises

would come from such an unlikely backwater place as Nazareth. But Nathanael's initial resistance to Philip's witness does not deter this new disciple; he does not scold his friend, nor does he take "no" for an answer. Instead, Philip issues a simple invitation that echoes Jesus' words to John's disciples: "*Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'*" Philip "*invites Nathanael to see for himself that the fulfillment of Scripture is indeed occurring in this human (son of Joseph) from Nazareth.*" (Gail O'Day).

While Nathanael at first resisted Philip's witness, he agrees to accompany his friend to meet this man from Nazareth. Because of his willingness to come to the one who John has identified as "*the life [that] was the life of all people*" (1:4), Jesus greets him by proclaiming that "*here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!*" (1:47). Jesus hails Nathanael as an "Israelite," a phrase used to convey Nathanael's faithfulness, recalling Psalm 32:2 and its description of a righteous believer ("*Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*"). By describing Nathanael as a true, guileless Israelite, Jesus is not saying that he is sinless, but that Nathanael is utterly sincere, enlightened, and completely dedicated to God. Jesus hails him as one truly representative of Israel, because "*the true bearer of the name of Israel will be one who is faithful to Yahweh and serves no other gods.*" (Raymond Brown).

Nathanael is understandably shocked by Jesus' greeting, responding "*where did you get to know me?*" (1:48), to which Jesus responds that "*I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.*" Fig trees, along with olive trees and grapevines, were locations that offered rabbis suitable places for study and teaching of the Law. Jesus may have noticed Nathanael in such a place, where he may have been reading Scripture, meditating, or praying. Such activity would indicate clearly to Jesus that Nathanael was truly an Israelite at heart and not just in outward appearance. At this point, Nathanael's entire attitude toward Jesus completely changes; no longer does he see him as a man from a rival community that is the object of contempt in his hometown. Nathanael's response to Jesus is more than witness; it is a confession that "*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!*" (1:49). "Son of God" is the central expression of Jesus' identity in John, because it recognizes Jesus' true origins; "king of Israel" expresses Jesus' significance for the people of God ("*Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!*" – 12:13).

Jesus' response to Nathanael's confession is a promise that suggests that Nathanael is only at the beginning point of his faith in Jesus: "*Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.*" (1:50).

The “greater things” that Nathanael will see will be occasions for deepening faith, including Jesus’ next saying that *“very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man”* (1:51). The phrase “very truly, I tell you” occurs twenty-five times in the Fourth Gospel and draws attention to the saying that follows. John the Baptist and his disciples have borne witness to Jesus; now Jesus offers his own powerful promise of self-revelation, identifying himself as the Son of Man, the one in John who bridges the distance between heaven and earth (*“No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”* – 3:13). This title *“continues the Fourth Evangelist’s focus on the cruciality of the incarnation as the way in which God is made known to God’s people.”* (O’Day). These verses combine Old Testament images from the descent of the Son of Man in Daniel and Jacob’s dream ladder in Genesis:

- “I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.” – Daniel 7:13-14
- “And [Jacob] dreamed that there was a ladder set up on earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” – Genesis 28:12.

Jacob’s ladder is replaced by the Son of Man, so that the Son of Man becomes the locus of God’s activity on earth: *“The Son of Man becomes the place where the earthly and the heavenly, divine and human, temporal and eternal meet.”* (O’Day).

Nathanael is the last of Jesus’ disciples to be called in the Fourth Gospel; he is among the disciples to whom the Risen Lord appears at the end of the Gospel (*“Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples.”* – 21:2). In Nathanael, John presents the fulfillment of the purpose of John the Baptist’s testimony that *“I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel”* (1:31). Because he accepts Philip’s invitation to *“come and see,”* Nathanael moves from skepticism to bold Christological confession. What marks Nathanael as a disciple is that he knows who Jesus is, that he sees that the man from Nazareth is in fact the Son of God. Nathanael’s declaration places him in the company of those who share in the confession that *“we have seen his glory”* (1:14). Nathanael’s identity as a disciple is grounded in the identity of Jesus.

- “Whoever he was, Nathanael serves in the Fourth Gospel as a symbol of the pious, God-fearing Israelite who, good as he was, stands incomplete, and must be willing to pass beyond his intellectual difficulties concerning Jesus into saving faith in him.” – E.P. Blair.

Thankfully, Craig’s revelation that he was from South Plainfield did not destroy our friendship, which continued throughout our years at university. While we lost contact with one another, I have often thought back to how getting to know who he was before I found out where he was from made all the difference. I have used this experience as a reminder that I need to judge a person not by how they appear, what language they speak, what religion they practice, or their country of origin; if I allow the prejudices that I was “carefully taught” to cloud my judgment, not only will I deprive myself of some great relationships but will also betray the will of God who loves all the people of the world without exception and desires “*everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth*” (1 Timothy 2:4). As Jesus looked upon each of us not as persons who had sinned, who had rebelled against God’s Will and turned their backs on God’s love, but as precious children of God, so does Nathanael’s example remind us that good things can come from places like Nazareth – places across the tracks, on the other side of the wall, in areas where we once could find nothing good. All it may take is a loving, persistent friend who will not allow us to remain locked into our former ways of thinking, who invites us to “come and see” so that our eyes may be opened, and we can see for ourselves the one who is not merely the son of Joseph of Nazareth but he who is the “Son of God ... the King of Israel.”

- “My study of Jesus convinces me that whatever barriers we must overcome in treating ‘different’ people cannot compare to what a holy God – who dwelled in the Most High Place, and whose presence caused fire and smoke to belch from mountaintops, bringing death to any unclean person who wandered near – overcame when he descended to join us on planet Earth ... All of us in the church need ‘grace-healed eyes’ to see the potential in others for the same grace that God has so lavishly bestowed on us. ‘To love a person,’ said Dostoevsky, ‘mean to see him as God intended him to be.’” – Philip Yancey.

Yes, good things can come out of Nazareth, or South Plainfield, or any place we once looked upon with suspicion or derision. Good things, good people, good experiences can come from any person in any place, for “*the earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it*” (Psalm 24:1). For those who join Nathanael in confessing the son of Joseph of Nazareth to be the Son of God and King of Israel, the world in which we live is not divided into “us vs. them.” There is only “us,” we

who are God's people, the sheep of his pasture, chosen and precious in the eyes of the one who "*loves the little children – **all** the little children of the world!*"

Amen.