

January 14, 2024
John 1:43-51

Epiphany 2
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Come and See”

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth? ... Come and see.”

In an episode of the classic sitcom *All in the Family*, Michael and Gloria are searching the classified ads for an apartment so that they can move out of the home of Archie and Edith, where they have lived since their marriage. This comes as great news to Archie, who has frequently clashed with the son-in-law he often refers to as “Meathead.” Michael and Gloria’s search at first does not go well; either the apartments listed are too small or too expensive. They lament that there does not appear to be anything available in Queens or Brooklyn, at which point Archie suggests that they “*try Jersey*” (New Jersey). Michael and Gloria ignore Archie’s advice, looking next for apartments in the Bronx and Staten Island – again to no avail. For a second time, Archie recommends that they “*try Jersey.*” But his advice again goes unheeded; Michael and Gloria pick up another newspaper that lists apartments for rent on Long Island, but their frustration only grows as they bemoan the fact that “*there’s nothing available!*” For a third time and in a louder voice, Archie encourages them to “*try Jersey.*” Finally, Michael answers, making it clear how he feels about his father-in-law’s suggestion: “*I hate Jersey!*” Archie looks him straight in the eye and responds, “*Everybody hates Jersey – but someone has to live there!*”

That fictional exchange sums up what it is like to be from New Jersey: learning to live with people’s derogatory opinions of my home state. New Jersey is often the butt of many jokes from people in New York and Philadelphia; when you tell someone you are from New Jersey, the first thing they often ask is “*what exit?*” in reference to the New Jersey Turnpike, which is some people’s only experience with my state. Because it is located between two major cities, New Jersey is often overlooked and dismissed as a faceless suburb or an endless series of refineries and chemical plants. One joke that New Yorkers often tell is that when they travel west through the Lincoln Tunnel, the light at the end of the tunnel that is usually a sign of hope turns out to be nothing more than New Jersey. Even though New Jersey has miles of beautiful seashore and mountainous villages in the northwest, it is often dismissed as a place that everyone hates but in which someone must live.

So, I can understand how someone like Nathanael might feel when Philip tells him that the Messiah is none other than “*Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.*” (John 1:45). While Jesus’ origins in this Galilean city have immortalized Nazareth for all generations, in its day Nazareth was an unimportant, out-of-the-way place that had little notoriety. Nazareth was a village of 200-400 people that, like several other communities in its area, was economically dependent on the city of Sepphoris, which was the capital of Galilee at the time. The Old Testament never mentions Nazareth, much less associate it with messianic expectations. In the view of someone like Nathaniel, Jesus would be nothing more than an ordinary Jew from an insignificant village in Galilee; “*the Messiah would certainly be of more prominent parentage and come from a more significant town.*” (Leslie J. Hoppe).

Today’s Gospel lesson, which includes the exchange between Philip and Nathanael, is a part of John’s account of the call of Jesus’ disciples. “*The next day*” (1:43) refers to the call of Andrew and Simon Peter; Andrew is identified as a disciple of John the Baptist who leaves the baptizer to follow Jesus when John points to Jesus and exclaims, “*Look, here is the Lamb of God!*” (1:36). After accepting Jesus’ invitation to “*come and see*” (1:39), Andrew finds his brother (known by his birth name Simon) and declares that “*we have found the Messiah (which is translated Anointed).*” (1:41). When Andrew brings Simon to meet Jesus, the man from Nazareth looks at him and says, “*you are Simon son of John. You shall be called Cephas (which is translated Peter).*” (1:42). Jesus’ calling of disciples continues “*the next day,*” when he finds Philip and issues the classic invitation to discipleship: “*Follow me*” (“*And Jesus said to [Simon and Andrew], ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’*” – Mark 1:17). John’s identification of Philip by name and place (“*Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter*” – 1:44) provides a link to the calling of Jesus’ first disciples, who will become his followers and then his witnesses after his death and resurrection. As Andrew found Simon and witnessed to Jesus, Philip then finds Nathanael and bears witness to the one who has called him to discipleship: “*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 of Nathanael; while some identify him as Bartholomew, his name does not appear in any of the other Gospels and is absent from the list of the Twelve. We also do not know how Philip and Nathanael know each other; but he must have been of such importance to Philip that he is the first one to whom he bears witness to Jesus after his call to become a disciple. Philip’s witness consists in two parts: he identifies Jesus as the fulfillment of all Scripture (“*The beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.*” – Luke 24:27) and identifies him by his human relationship: “*Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.*”

For the first time in the Fourth Gospel, testimony to Jesus is met with resistance; instead of accepting Philip's invitation and becoming a disciple of Jesus, Nathanael responds with a sarcastic retort: "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" (1:46). Nathanael's response reflects the sentiments of many in Israel who were expecting a Messiah who would come from the holy city of Jerusalem, the center of political and economic power, religious authority, and God's own dwelling place in the Temple. Nathanael will not be the only person in this Gospel to question how the Messiah could come from such a small, insignificant place:

- "When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, 'This is really the prophet.' Others said, 'This is the Messiah.' But some asked, 'Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he?'" – 7:41.
- "They replied, 'Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.'" – 7:52.

Given such a context of expectation, we might forgive Nathanael for his response to Philip's announcement that the Messiah is a man from Nazareth: "*Who would imagine that God's anointed one could come from a place so distant from the center of power? A messiah from Nazareth, in Galilee? Inconceivable!*" (Audrey West). Philip could have responded with anger at Nathanael's condescending remark in response to his earnest invitation to meet the one he believes is the Messiah. He could have said "forget it!" and walked away from someone who was so sarcastic and dismissive of the possibility that the Messiah could come from such a place as Nazareth; but instead, Philip responds to Nathanael's dismissive skepticism by echoing the words of Jesus to his first disciples: "*Come and see.*" Philip does not engage in an argument with Nathanael, nor does he launch into a detailed theological explanation as to why he believes Jesus is the Messiah. His response is a simple, no obligation invitation to Nathanael to meet Jesus and see for himself whether he is the anointed one of God. If Nathanael still believes that the Messiah cannot be a man from Nazareth, he would be free to leave and go on his way. "*Philip invites Nathaniel to see for himself that the fulfillment of Scripture is indeed occurring in the human son of Joseph from Nazareth.*" (Gail O'Day).

Nathanael accepts Philip's invitation, and the two travel to the place where they will meet Jesus; but before arriving in his presence, John reports that "*when Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!'*" (1:47). In hailing him as an "Israelite," Jesus is praising Nathanael for his model faithfulness ("*Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*" – Psalm 32:2). Nathanael is at first stunned by these words; he asks Jesus "*where did you get to know me,*" to which

Jesus responds, *“I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you”* (1:48). Some biblical texts speak of being in the shade of a fig tree as a symbol of the peace of the messianic age (*“... but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.”* – Micah 4:4). After hearing these words, Nathanael’s skepticism is replaced by a bold declaration of faith: *“Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”* (1:49). Nathanael’s transformation from skeptical doubt to unbridled faith will be echoed by Thomas, who is given the proof he needs from Jesus so that his doubt is replaced by a bold declaration that Jesus is *“my Lord and my God!”* (20:28). Nathanael’s addressing Jesus as “Rabbi” links his response to the words of the first disciples: *“Rabbi (which translated means Teacher) where are you staying?”* (1:38). The confession that Jesus is the “Son of God” is the central expression of Jesus’ identity in the Fourth Gospel, because it is the recognition of Jesus’ true origins as the one who is *“the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth.”* (1:14). His proclamation that *“You are the king of Israel!”* refers to a term that I used as a form of mockery and derision at Jesus’ crucifixion (*“He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him.”* – Matthew 27:42) but is used in the Fourth Gospel to express 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’ words strike Nathanael as a prophetic announcement that he will himself have a place in the messianic age, and Nathanael responds with an acclamation of Jesus as Messiah. He is rewarded with a solemn promise from Jesus: ‘You will see greater things than these.’” – Curtis Martin and William Wright.

Jesus’ words in response to Nathanael’s bold confession of faith are not a rebuke but a promise, suggesting that Nathanael is only at the beginning point of his faith in Jesus. The “greater things” Nathanael will see will be occasions of deepening faith. Nathanael’s declaration that Jesus is the Son of God and King of Israel echoes Jacob’s amazement following a dream about angels ascending and descending upon a ladder in heaven:

- “And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven and the angels of God ascending and descending on it ... Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!’” – Genesis 28:12, 16.

Jesus promises Nathanael that he will have a similar experience to that of Jacob: *“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). “Very truly, I tell you” is a phrase that occurs twenty-five times in the Fourth Gospel and draws attention to the phrase that follows. Jesus identifies himself as the “Son of Man,” a title used in the Synoptic Gospels to speak of Jesus’ suffering and death and his future coming:

- “See, I am going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentile to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised.” – Matthew 20:18-19.
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- “Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” – Mark 8:38.
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- “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” – Luke 9:22.

The title continues the Fourth Gospel’s focus on the cruciality of the Incarnation as the way in which God is made known to God’s people. The verse combines images of the descent of the Son of Man in Jacob’s dream ladder as well as in the prophecy of Daniel: *“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”* (Daniel 7:13-14). *“The Son of Man becomes the place where the earthly and the heavenly, divine and human, temporal and eternal meet.”* (O’Day).

The encounter between Philip and Nathanael and the transformation of Nathanael from skeptic to bold confessor faith in Jesus Christ stands as an important lesson for all generations of people as to how we are to both share and respond to the Gospel message that Jesus of Nazareth is our Messiah and Lord. It is a lesson in the importance of invitations and how even something as simple as “come and see” can be life-changing for the one who receives and accepts such an invite. It is a lesson in how we are to respond to rejection not with hurt, insult or dismissal, but with a simple offer to the one who expresses doubt or skepticism to “come and see” for themselves. For those of us who may find ourselves identifying with someone like Nathanael, it is a reminder that as the sovereign Lord God can choose to fulfill the promise of the Messiah at any time and from every place – even a place as unlikely

as Nazareth; for God has declared that *“my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”* (Isaiah 55:8-9). Paul reminds the people of Corinth *“God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing the things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God”* (1 Corinthians 1:27-29). Those who would be followers of the man from Nazareth are called to have the same mind in them that was in Christ Jesus, *“who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”* (Philippians 2:6-7). God can often be found in unexpected places and comes to us in a way that is unexpected and for many hard to accept, which may explain Nathanael’s initial reluctance to believe Philip’s declaration. But it is through accepting Philip’s simple invitation that Nathanael moves from skepticism to a bold Christological confession of faith:

- “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 ‘we have seen his glory.’ One’s identity as a disciple is grounded in the identity of Jesus.” – O’Day.

At the end of the episode, Michael and Gloria choose to stay with Gloria’s parents – much to the chagrin of Archie. While I have grown used to the episode’s attitudes toward my home state, I have always wondered how their lives may have changed if they had moved to the place they claimed to hate, a place so unappealing that people only live there if they have no other options. They may have discovered that blessings can come from the most unexpected places – indeed, the greatest good of all can even come from such an unlikely place as Nazareth!

Amen.