

The Second Sunday After the Epiphany
“Can Anything Good Come out of Nazareth?”

By Rev. Ruth Ragovin

January 17, 2021

John 1:43-51 ~ ⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” ⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” ⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” ⁵⁰Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”



Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael
William Hole, Life of Jesus CD

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Every year *U.S. News and World* provides its list of the best places to live in the United States evaluated in terms of being a desirable community to live with a strong job market and high quality of life. According to them, these are the top five places to live in the U.S. in 2020-21: Boulder, Colorado; Denver, Colorado; Austin, Texas; Colorado Springs, Colorado; and Fort Collins, Colorado. <https://realestate.usnews.com/places/rankings/best-places-to-live>

Of course, their list does not include another important metric that is becoming increasingly important, namely happiness. *National Geographic* did their own analysis taking happiness into account and came up with this list, which does overlap in some places with *U.S. News and World*. The top five happiest places to live in the USA in 2020 were: Austin, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Colorado Springs, Colorado; Fayetteville, Arkansas; and, Des Moines, Iowa <https://www.questionsanswered.net/article/10-happiest-places-live-us?ad=dirN&qo=serpIndex&o=740012>

We know how it feels to be listed in such positive terms for, in 2012, Murray, KY, was named the friendliest small town in all of America! Previously it was ranked as the best place to retire and one of the best places to raise a family. Our university receives high ratings and recently was at the top of recruiting veterans. It feels good to live in a place that ranks so highly, doesn't it? And to come from a town that boasts such excellent schools, is beside Land Between the Lakes with its world class fishing, and has an extremely low cost of living. No one should feel ashamed to come from Murray!

Now I don't know how you felt when you heard the list of the 5 best or happiest places to live in the USA in 2020, but how do you feel and what images come to mind when you now hear the list of the 5 worst places in the United States to Live, as given by *USA Today*? They are (starting with the worst): Yazoo City, Mississippi; Donaldsville, Louisiana; Fair Oaks, Georgia; Beecher, Michigan; and, Irondale, Georgia.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2020/02/29/americas-50-worst-cities-to-live/111367058/>

How about the most dangerous? In 2020, the five most dangerous cities were listed as Detroit, Michigan; Memphis, TN; Birmingham, Alabama; Baltimore, Maryland; and St. Louis, Missouri. <https://www.mapquest.com/travel/25-most-dangerous-cities-in-the-us-in-2020/>

I don't know about you, but when I hear that list, I'm ashamed to admit that I default into thinking that these places are all crime infested, lacking culture, with bad schools, high unemployment and this yuck kind of feeling rises up in me against my best intentions. You all may be above that but, while it is wrong and probably even sinful, I think it's pretty common to

cast stereotypes and look down on people who come from the so-called other side of the railroad tracks. The tracks that divide the upper from the middle and lower classes, blacks from whites from Hispanics from Asians, native English speakers from non-English speakers, Jews from Muslims, Hindus from Buddhists, northerners from southerners, straights from gays, urban from rural, Democrats from Republicans, students at Calloway County from those at Murray High, doctors and nurses at the Murray Calloway County hospital and those at what used to be called Primary Care, Protestants and Catholics, Church of Christ from Disciples of Christ, and, obviously, smug Americans from the rest of the world. For, oh, don't we pride ourselves as thinking we live in the best nation on earth! And, oh, don't we pride ourselves in thinking that we are right and have a corner on the truth!

I would like us to carry our own, even if inadvertent, implicit biases and secret prejudices into today's lectionary scripture from the Gospel of John. The day after John baptized Jesus in the Jordan river, John was with two of his disciples. As Jesus walked by, John told his disciples **"Look, here is the Lamb of God!"** (vs. 36). John's disciples began following Jesus and asked him where he was staying. He simply said **"Come and see."** (vs. 37). One of them was named Andrew, who, after spending time with Jesus, rushed off to find his brother Simon and exclaimed **"We have found the Messiah (which is translated Anointed)"** (vs. 41). The two brothers went to Jesus. Jesus 'saw' Simon and what he would become and told him that henceforth he was to be called Cephas (Peter).

And now we find ourselves where today's scripture begins as we sit with Jesus, Andrew and Peter in Bethany as Jesus decides what next step he would like to take: where he should next go and who he should find. **"Jesus decided to go to Galilee"** (vs. 43). It also seems that he was looking for someone that Andrew and Peter had told him about named Philip, who also was from Bethsaida. Jesus found Philip and said: **"Follow me"** (vs. 43). Perhaps Andrew and Peter already had gone ahead and told Philip what they had learned about Jesus. We don't know the details but we do know that not only did Philip decide to follow Jesus but he then immediately went looking for his friend Nathanael. When Philip found Nathanael he said, likely with incredible excitement and enthusiasm: **"We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth"** (vs. 45). Nathanael initially exhibits caution and hesitation. In his response we find the kind of implicit bias and prejudice all of us harbor when we are told about where someone comes from. **Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"** (vs. 46). Ouch! Definitely not a very kind thing to say, is it?

In the same way we might not have known much about the places listed on the 5 worst places to live in the United States in 2020, Nazareth was not on most people's radar screen. It was a simple unassuming village with about 200-400 people, which had no clout or influence. It stood under the shadow of Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee. You hardly noticed it if you were traveling between the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee. There were no great attractions. It was never mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures. No Messianic expectations were attached to it. There would be no reason to go into its gates except perhaps for a pit stop, to visit a relative, to go to a funeral, or to buy a wooden yoke for their oxen from one of the carpenters. The people there were looked down upon for their accents, which might have indicated a lack of culture and backwardness. Some said that Nazareth had produced revolutionaries and that dangerous thugs were living there. When Jesus was described as Jesus of Nazareth or a "Nazarene" it had mostly negative connotations.

No wonder Nathanael questioned if anything good could come out of Nazareth in the same way we might ask whether anything good could come out of Yazoo City, Donaldsville, Fair Oaks, Beecher or Irondale. No, the Messiah surely would come out of a place like Jerusalem, Rome, or Athens. Nazareth, just down the road from Nathanael, is nowhere'sville.

It's amazing, isn't it, how we learn to stereotype from such an early age and create lists of who is worthy and who is not. We internalize a caste system and close our minds and hearts. We automatically judge people by the town they are from and neighborhood they live in, who their parents were, their socio-economic status, the color of their skin, their ethnicity, their religion, their gender identity or sexual orientation, the schools they went to, their ability or disability, the political party they belong to. Have you noticed that one of the first questions we ask people is "where are you from?" "Who are your people?" "What is your tribe?" "Where did you go to school?" And, at the top of the list today, "are you a Democrat or a Republican?" And then we make an assessment based on that of the other person's status and whether they are worthy or not.

Any of you make determinations that way? Come on, be honest! For example, northerners have these awful stereotypes about southerners being uneducated and uncultured. And I often hear southerners in Murray malign northerners such as me as being rude and heartless. We might think those stereotypes or statements are funny, but I will tell you they get old and they sometimes hurt because they simply are not true. Think back to a time when you felt you were unjustly stereotyped. Maybe it wasn't a geographical Nazareth. But maybe it was a Nazareth type of feeling as you felt stereotyped as not smart, pretty or handsome, talented, interesting, popular, athletic, worthwhile, or white, straight, middle or upper class. Maybe one of those is

your Nazareth experience by which you have been stereotyped. I guess because I have lived in so many places both in this country and abroad I still feel the pain of being put on the other side of the tracks in people's minds and hearts. How hard it was, for example, at the age of eleven to emigrate from this country to Canada during the Vietnam War when Americans were reviled. Just starting middle school, the other kids in my class had already absorbed their parents and country's view of Americans and it made it difficult for me initially to make friends especially because I was painfully shy. How hard it was a few years later when we had moved to Germany and, while on a week-long school field trip across the border in France, to have some villagers actually throw stones at me telling me I was an ugly American. How tired I have gotten my whole life in being told "You're not from here!" How much it hurts to have people not want to attend worship services here because you have hired a female minister, for how could God call a person in a female body to preach the good news? But does geography (be it physical or otherwise) determine worth, potential, and even whether God can use you? Doesn't God have a say in all of that?

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nathanael asks. Can anything good come out of Kentucky? "Think of a boy wearing a coonskin cap, and trousers made out of a deerskin, driving four cows down a woody pathway in the wilds of Kentucky. Not much culture, not much of a home, not much possibility of an education. This boy, Abraham Lincoln, helped navigate our country during some of its darkest days as our President. When I think of his background, I recognize, in response to Nathanael's question "Can anything good come out of Nazareth," the answer is "Yes, indeed!" <https://sermons.com/sermon/looking-ahead-with-hope/1344934>

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nathanael asks. Closer to home in terms of dates. Think of a young African American boy who was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia, the son of a minister. "When he was a child he befriended a white boy whose father owned a business near his family's home. They became best friends. When the boys were six, they started school: but he had to attend a school for African Americans and the other boy went to one for whites, since public schools were segregated. His friend's father refused to let their friendship continue." He always remembered that painful incident and when, at the age of 18, he felt a call to ministry, he dedicated his life to removing the dividing walls of American society. The youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize at the age of 35, for leading nonviolent resistance to racial prejudice in the U.S., Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated just a few years later on the evening of April 4, 1968, while standing on the balcony of his motel room in Memphis, Tennessee, where he was to lead a protest march in sympathy with striking garbage workers of that city. <https://nationaltoday.com/martin-luther-kings-birthday/> This upcoming Monday, January 18, 2021, on MLK Jr Day, as a nation we are called to remember his legacy and to

continue to work toward his stated dream of ***“a day when people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”*** When I think of his background, I answer, in response to Nathanael’s question “Can anything good come out of Nazareth,” with “Yes, indeed!”

I think we can all agree that racism is rearing its ugly head. Some of the people who marched on the Capitol last week were white supremacists and anti-Semites. The incident opened our eyes to the ugly and dangerous divides in our country with people being unable to see that anything good could ever come out of a “Nazareth.” “Nazareth” being someone of a different political persuasion. “Nazareth” being anyone who doesn’t see the world through the same lens we do. “Nazareth” being anyone we have “othered.”

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Nathanael asks. And in response, Philip doesn’t try to rationalize or justify or change Nathanael’s mind by talking to him about it. His response to Nathanael is actually quite astonishing. Philip repeats what Jesus had said to him when he asked him where he was staying: “Come and see!” Come and see Nathanael! I’m not trying to convince you of anything Nathanael. Instead, why don’t you cross the railroad tracks of your mind and heart by meeting Jesus in person, hear what he has to say to you, and make up your own mind. Come and see what his view of the world is.

And Nathanael, one who approached life with open minded curiosity and a desire to judge things for himself, went with Philip to see Jesus. Astonishingly, Nathanael discovered when he went to see Jesus that he himself already had been seen in his deepest essence. Jesus told him that he had seen him beneath the fig tree and when he looked into his deepest essence had seen a good Israelite in whom there was no deceit (guile). To be emphasized here is that Jesus could have told Nathanael that he had seen a hardened and prejudicial heart in him. But, instead, he celebrated the goodness in Nathanael. Debie Thomas reminds us that: “Jesus named the quality he wanted to bless and cultivate in his would-be follower, the quality that made Nathanael a person of beauty, an image-bearer of God.” (Debie Thomas, ‘What Do You See?’ in <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2883>) In response, Nathanael makes one of the greatest professions of faith in history: ***“Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”*** (vs. 49). It is my belief that Nathanael was able to see who Jesus was, not just the son of the carpenter Joseph from Nazareth but also the Messiah they had been waiting for, because he himself had first been seen!

Seeing. Being seen. I know it's become an overly popularized saying that has almost become trite but the phrase "I see you!" is transformative. We all want to be seen. We are becoming a society that is blind. We no longer see others as they are in their essence. We have lost the ability to see as people who are seen by God as God's beloved children and to see others in this same light. And this blindness is literally destroying us. Do we not all need to become Nathanaels and bring with us open hearts and minds and a willingness to listen to and learn from others who do not share our perspective at this crisis moment in our history? Is it not up to each of us as individuals and as a church to work toward greater understanding and reconciliation as though our nation's future depended on it? Is it not our responsibility to battle for the soul of our nation? Would it be possible, in the words of Debie Thomas, to "come and see' ... to approach all of life with a grace-filled curiosity, to believe that we are holy mysteries to each other, worthy of further exploration"? (Debie Thomas, 'What Do You See?' in <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2883>)

A recent *Wall Street Journal* article by Janet Adamy with the title "A Church Tries to Navigate America's Divisions" (WSJ, December 18, 2020) described how one congregation took the divides in our society seriously. The congregants were a mix of conservatives, liberals, and independents who had opposing views on health care, immigration, gun control, abortion, immigration, taxes, and so much more. Yet they cared about each other and our society enough to agree to come and see, with the hopes that they too might be seen. They gathered on Zoom using workbooks created by a nonprofit group called "Colossian Forum," which had sessions on the various issues that are dividing our country. They started with a discussion of guns and respectfully listened to each person share their views and why. In another session they talked about health care, especially in light of the coronavirus pandemic. Week by week they moved onto other issues. They began dissecting political ads together and looking at how the news and social media impair our vision. After Biden won the election this group of Christians of different political parties shared their hopes and fears of what this would do to the nation. The effect of this was that the participants both felt seen and could see more clearly. "Your opinions are more meaningful to me now that I know you better as a person," one person said. Another agreed that "it makes her more human, more emotional, more real," to which someone replied with relief that "my heart is warmed and I'm so grateful for that." I would like to see our community engage in a "Colossian Forum," using their materials. For this to happen our congregation may have to initiate it. <https://colossianforum.org/> Are any of you interested in helping with this?

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Well, I encourage all of you to Come and See! Come and see someone who lives on the other side of the metaphorical railroad tracks you have created in your hearts and minds. Come and see why someone might hold different political views from you. Can you imagine a Democrat and Republican sitting down and taking the time to see why they hold their beliefs and perspectives about our nation so near and dear? I'm ready and so eager for this process to begin right here among us and am willing to do the hard work in setting it up.

Let us heed Jesus' call to Philip and then Philip's call to Nathanael to "Come and see!" Perhaps you will find your perspective broadening and your hearts opening saying "Well they aren't so bad after all! Now I understand where they are coming from. I never knew that about her. Even though he belongs to a different political party, he's helping me see things in new ways. I really respect her. I find myself warming up to him. I'd like to invite them over for dinner when we are in the aftermath of the pandemic. Or go out with them for a drink to dig deeper into these issues."

Come and see! Come and be seen! Above all, come and see and be seen by that little boy born in a manger in Bethlehem, who first fled for his life with his parents to Egypt, and then returned to spend the next 27 of his 33 years in that nowhere backwater village of Nazareth that no one thought any good could come out of. Come and see and experience for yourselves all the many things he has to teach and show you! For, with Nathanael, he tells all of us here today: "***You (plural) will see greater things than these. ... Very truly, I tell y'all, y'all will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.***" (vs. 50-51). Come and see all the people he desperately wants to introduce you to! Come and see all he has in store for you and wants you to do, using the gifts and talents he has given to you to use for building God's Kingdom on earth, including and perhaps especially during this crisis moment in the life of our nation.

Can any good come out of the Nazareth you have created in your minds and hearts? Well, in 2021, I encourage you to join with Philip and Nathanael and come and see!

Closing Prayer: Open the eyes of our hearts, Lord, so that day by day we might see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly day by day. Amen.