

“Can Anything Good Come out Nazareth?”

Scripture: John 1:43-51

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This morning we welcome the Confirmation Class as confirmed members of Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church. It seemed appropriate before beginning the sermon today to say a word about what preaching means. For some, preaching is being told something I do not want to hear. “Don’t preach to me,” we say. But I am talking about the preaching that takes place in worship.

Some preaching is topical. You take a topic and you talk about it: joy...end of the world...the devil. Other sermons are more addressed to current life situations. The preacher says: I am going to tell you how to be better student, a better husband, a better mother. And if not a “how to” sermon, it may be “helpful hints for hurting hearts.” Then there are “The Bible says” sermons: the Bible says this, the Bible says that, and the sermon skips all around the Bible.

I have preached sermons like these...and will, on occasion, preach sermons like them again. But here’s what I do...what I am trained to do. Take a Biblical text and look at it; look under it, look through it. Wear it...imagine it...argue with it. The trust is that God will speak through the text. And I will not be able to name all the ways that you will become a more faithful parent, become more dedicated in your prayer, or what you should do at school or on the job. Here’s what I can do: to help you work through a text.

In some ways it is like focusing the projector here in the sanctuary on the screen. When you first turn the projector on and put an image on the screen, you can’t see the image clearly. It is all fuzzy and blurred. So you turn the lens and begin to get better picture. You turn it some more and gets even better. Then you turn it some more and it gets worse again. So you go back the other direction. You keep twisting back and forth until you find just the right spot: focused.

So what is a sermon? Ideally, it is matter of twisting and turning until we get to that point we see clearly. Our trust as Presbyterians in worship is that God uses a Biblical text to speak to us. So this morning I invite you move through a text with some twisting and turning.

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Here is the first twist to help us focus. We are going to hear about three people in this text: Philip, Nathanael, and Jesus. We are at the beginning of this Gospel, so we have Jesus recruiting his disciples, in this case Philip and Nathanael. Jesus simply says: “Follow me” and Philip was in. I just love those Philip-sort-of-disciples...don’t understand them...but I love them. Jesus just says: “Follow me.” And they say, “Sure.” There is no struggle...no need for other authorities...no need for family nurture...they just say, “Sure, I’ll follow; tell me what to do.” Some people don’t seem to struggle at being Jesus’ followers.

And then there is Nathanael. Philip finds Nathanael and says: “We have found the one whom Moses and prophets spoke, Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathanael, we might expect, will come to faith by the witness of Philip but it doesn’t happen. What are the first words out of Nathanael’s mouth? A complaint! My kind of disciple! One who complains.

So listen now to the story first of Philip and then of Nathanael:

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

So here is the first twist in focusing on this text: Nathanael complains: Can anything good come out of Nazareth! Now there are several reasons for why Nathanael might have voiced this complaint. Nazareth was a “Podunk” town...it was a tiny village...there were no religious expectations in the Old Testament about Nazareth. And Nathanael is from a rival community—the city of Cana. It is like what the people in York might say about Clover: Can anything good come out of Clover? Or, what those in Rock Hill might say about Chester. And I suppose what those in Chester would say about Great Falls! But no matter the reasoning, Nathanael begins as a complainer.

So, how does Jesus address this whiner? He addresses him with a compliment. I didn’t expect that—the text just got fuzzy again. In fact, I can’t think of any other disciple where Jesus begins with a “compliment”—particularly a compliment to someone who seems so skeptical and sarcastic. But here is what Jesus says to Nathanael: “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” More literally, Jesus is saying here is person in whom there is no guile, no hidden agenda, no attempt to con.

Let’s focus a little more on Jesus’ compliment. Jesus could have said: Here is a person in whom there is no deceit, or guile, or trickery. But Jesus said: Here is an Israelite. Something is going on here. The first Israelite was man by the name of Jacob. And you know what he known for? Trickery, guile, deceit, scheming, a con artist. Jesus says here is a descendent of the first Israelite who has no deceit or guile about him. So Jesus says: Here is an Israelite in whom there is no Jacob—sometimes the “acorn does fall far from the tree.”

Jesus heaps praise on a complainer in whom there is no guile, no “axe to grind.” Now that is not my experience of complaints—complaints usually have an agenda. My complaints usually fall in the one of the following three categories:

- Complaint Number 1: Something bothers me and if I complain to you then I can transfer the bother to you. One of the “givens” in life is that someone will complain to us to get us to try to fix someone else. There is no sense in getting upset about it...it is going to happen.
- Complaint Number 2: I was right and I want you to know it. “I tried to tell everyone but, did anyone listen to me? No. I knew it wouldn’t work!”
- Complaint Number 3: I don’t like the consequences that are happening to me. “Officer, why are you pulling me over? Shouldn’t you be out catching real criminals? I was just little over the

speed limit. And I saw on the Jerry Springer show that those radar guns are just not accurate.”

You know what these complaints have in common? They are about what we want to control. We want to get it our way...or, at least, get credit for being right.

How can Jesus praise a complainer? Perhaps we ought to look closer at Nathanael’s complaint. Nathanael’s complaint is not about control. How is this an Israelite who truly without guile, without deceit, without a hidden agenda? His complaint is not about control!

Nathanael does not say: Can bad come out of Nazareth? Can bad come out—that’s a complainer’s dream question. So, for example, can bad come out of the church? If you think sermons are too long, you can imagine how long the lists of complaints are about the church. Can bad come out of school? Of course, and let me tell you about it. Can bad come out of the television? That’s a silly question to even ask, isn’t it? But note Nathanael’s question: Can anything good come out of Nazareth. His complaint is about the possibility of good.

The pithy quote of George Bernard Shaw bears repeating here: Shaw said: “Some people see things and ask, ‘Why?’ I dream things and ask, ‘Why not?’” The “why” question is usually about assigning blame and fault so that we can control the future. The “why” question is about assigning who is at fault. The “why not” question leaves the future open to possibilities. The “why not” question invites rather than condemns. Jesus praises Nathanael because he knows how to complain. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Jesus praises Nathaniel for asking about the possibilities rather focusing on all the negatives.

And then we twist the focus again: For Jesus tells Nathanael that he, Jesus, knows Nathanael because he saw him under the fig tree. And Nathanael says, “You saw me under the fig tree? Then you must be the Son of God.” I don’t know about you, but this twist made things fuzzy again. Just because you saw me under the fig tree?

I loved what one Biblical scholar said about this reference to the fig tree. The scholar said it is like a cave that a serious Bible student can delve into deep—we could meander for hours in all the caverns of possible meanings...but all the explanations would suffocate most any congregation. In other words, there are so many explanations that no one knows for sure what it means.

But here’s what we can say for certain. It demonstrates that Jesus knew Nathanael and still wanted to be in relationship with him. Jesus knew Nathanael and still wanted him as a disciple. A few years back, the premise of a Jim Carey movie, *Liar, Liar*, was that he would have to tell the absolute truth for a day. We are not talking about truth in general...it meant telling what he thought of people, what he was thinking, having all his thoughts said out loud. It meant being fully known.

Even people that love us could not live with knowing everything we are thinking! It is like the old scene of the wife asking the husband, “Does this outfit make me look fat?” Husband, don’t even think about answering that question truthfully. The only answer is, “No.” It is like the Jewish tradition that there are some exceptions to the commandment about not “bearing false witness”...about not lying. And one exception is this. If asked the question, “Was the bride beautiful?” the answer is always the same: “Yes, the bride was beautiful.”

Jesus saw Nathanel under the fig tree. Was Nathanael doing something wrong? We can't say that. But Jesus was saying: "I know you." I will readily confess I take offense when someone says to me: "I know what you are thinking....I know how you feel." How could you know what I am thinking? You do not live between my ears. I know how you feel? Do you know the angels and demons with which I wrestle?

Jesus says: I saw you under the fig tree. I know you. And instead of taking offense, Nathanael confesses his faith, his connection, his willingness to be a follower of Jesus. Here is one who fully knows us and accepts us.

And then there is third final twist of the lens as we consider Nathanael's discipleship. Jesus promises Nathanael that there is more to come. Literally, what Jesus said was: "You will see the angels of heaven ascending and descending on the Son of Man [or me]." This is a big claim. It is also a reference back to that first Israelite...that first Israelite who was Jacob...the Jacob whom God renamed "Israel."

Before God changed his name, Jacob was most known for his slyness, his deceit, his guile. He knew how to get his mother to do what he wanted. He knew how to fool his dad. He knew how to cheat his brother to get what he—Jacob—wanted. And when all his scheming caught up with him, he had to leave town. His father was fed up with him. His brother was trying to kill him. And his mother was scared for his life. And there Jacob was out on the road, leaving all that mess behind. In the midst of all this, Jacob has a dream...a dream that there is ladder that connects earth to heaven...a ladder where God's messengers move up and down...a ladder that connects him to God.

Now in some ways I have a complaint about this story. Jacob was a wily trickster who had no problem cheating his brother, stealing from his father, and manipulating his mother. And he has this wonderful dream. Why does Jacob get this dream! Shouldn't all his victims be the ones who are blessed with a wonderful dream? Shouldn't they be the ones who get the comfort of knowing that God is with them?

Jacob, in whom there is much guile and deceit, has this wonderful vision. Says Jesus to Nathanael, you are going to have the same sort of vision in me. Stick around and see.

Are we always going to see? No. But if we stick around this one who knew Nathanael completely...who knows us completely...then we will see. I will say to you in the Confirmation Class today that you have seen rightly in making the decision to confess your faith and be counted as confirmed members of this congregation...but you have not seen it all yet. Like Nathanael, there is more to come. Stick around and see how God will be connected here in the church. Stick around and see how God will be connected to you. You are going to see more.

So, to you the Confirmation Class and to all of us who are disciples of Jesus, we have twisted and turned to come to this focus:

- Be complainers...be whiners...be like Nathanael. Complain about the possibilities that have not been reached yet...the good that might come.
- Know that you are known...known fully and are accepted. Accept that you are accepted by God.
- And, along the way, keep your eye out: you will see the connection between God and this world, between God and you.