

I Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51
Second Sunday after Epiphany
Caroline M. Kelly
January 14, 2018

Can anything good come out of Nazareth, asks Nathanael?

Nazareth was a small insignificant village tucked in the hills of Galilee, not the kind of place you would expect to produce much of anything.

We have lots of names for places like that.

Backwoods.

Boonies.

Hicksville.

Redneck.

Illiterate.

Backwards.

Behind the times.

Dead end.

And those are the nice names.¹

As residents of Western Maryland, we know what it feels like to be on the receiving end of disparaging remarks like those. We've heard our small mountain communities called a name or two. South Cumberland, where Jim and I live is often the subject of unkind remarks.

In my adopted hometown of Atlanta, where policy decisions at the state capitol often pitted the urban elites against the mountain dwellers of north Georgia or the peanut farmers of south Georgia, it was not uncommon to hear this kind of name calling as well.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Nazareth wasn't a place you wanted to visit 2,000 years ago. Scholars believe it was poor and dirty, forgotten, and ostracized, not unlike any number of places around the world. Take the small towns in Puerto Rico and Haiti that were devastated by hurricanes in recent years, for instance, and the remote villages of south Sudan or northern Syria and Iraq, destroyed by civil war.

Every country and state and province has a place like Nazareth. It's a place where nothing ever happens, where no one of distinction lives, and no one of importance comes from.

¹ <https://www.crosswalk.com/blogs/dr-ray-pritchard/nazareth-can-anything-good-come-from-there.html>.

That's why Nathanael asked Phillip, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"²

No true Messiah could come from a place like Nazareth. Surely, the Anointed One would come from a place of culture and education, like the capital city of Jerusalem, not some Podunk town in Galilee.

Nathanael eventually comes to know the truth of who Jesus is, calling him the "Son of God" and the "King of Israel," but not before first calling his humble origins into question.

It's no wonder his own people did not accept him. He came into the world but the world did not know him.

"Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

"Come and see," says Philip.

Philip doesn't answer Nathanael's question. He doesn't try to convince Nathanael of anything. He simply invites him to come and see for himself. Come and see. And to Nathanael's credit, he goes.

Nathanael goes to see Jesus, but finds that Jesus has already seen him. Jesus sees him and, somehow, knows him. Eugene Peterson's translation of the conversation,

When Jesus saw [Nathanael] coming he said, "There's a real Israelite, not a false bone in his body."

Nathanael said, "Where did you get that idea? You don't know me."

Jesus answered, "One day, long before Philip called you here, I saw you under the fig tree."

Nathanael exclaimed, "Rabbi! You are the Son of God, the King of Israel!"³

Can't you just hear the echoes of the psalmist in his response? "Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. Even before a word is on my tongue, Lord, you know it completely."⁴

We all long to be known, to belong, and to be affirmed, regardless of our race or ethnicity, regardless of our country of origin or neighborhood, our educational background, or our political perspective. We long for our stories to be heard and our dreams to be realized.

² Ibid.

³ John 1:47-49, *The Message*.

⁴ Psalm 139: 1-2, 4 NRSV.

Not long after I graduated from seminary, I joined a local effort to help resettle some of the Lost Boys in Atlanta. They were part of a group of 20,000 boys who had fled their villages in south Sudan during the Sudanese civil war. They wandered hundreds of miles across the desert seeking safety, first in Ethiopia and later in Kenya.

Along the way, they had eaten leaves and had even been forced to drink their own urine, just to survive. They were attacked by lions and, at one point, forced to swim across a river of crocodiles to escape the shots of Ethiopian soldiers firing on them as they fled the country.

After a decade of living in a Kenyan refugee camp, nearly 4,000 of the Lost Boys came to the U.S. and a large number of them were settled in the Atlanta area. When they arrived, they looked to be in their teens or early twenties, but no one knew for sure because they couldn't remember when they were born. The government gave them all birthdays of January 1st.

They were treated as superstars when they first arrived, having survived this unbelievable ordeal and managed to keep up their education while they lived in the refugee camp. But it didn't take long before they began to experience what it felt like to be a person with dark skin in the United States.

They had come with nothing but the clothes on their backs, some school books and Bibles they salvaged from the camp, and their stories. They had never seen a toilet, much less lived in an apartment, cooked on a stove, or held a real job.

For the ones I knew, faith was their saving grace. They trusted that the God who had been with them during the civil war and the wandering and the refugee camps would not leave them now. But they longed mightily to be known as the men they had become rather than black men with strange accents.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birth our nation remembers this weekend, described that kind of longing in his now famous "I Have a Dream Speech" on the Mall in Washington, D.C.. He dreamed aloud of the day when his own children would live in a nation where they would not be known and judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

More than 50 years later, people are still longing to be seen and known, not as people who are black or brown, not as people who are from another country, not as people from places like Nazareth, but as people who are made in the image of God, and known and loved for who they really are and not as other people imagine them.

This desire to be seen and heard and known is part of what you will explore if you choose to participate in the book study that Ann, Pam and Cheri are leading during the next month. They hope the conversations will help awaken us to a new awareness of our own racial identity and stories and the impact they have on our lives today, sometimes without us even being aware.

Nathanael's encounter with the man from Nazareth transformed him. And recognizing that this remarkable man had seen him and known him through and through, Nathanael began to see Jesus for who he was, someone whose identity was certainly shaped by his place of origin but not limited by it.

Jesus never shed his identity as the man from Nazareth. Twice more in John's gospel, he will be identified by his hometown.

The first time, Jesus and his disciples are in the garden, being confronted by Judas and the soldiers who have come to arrest him. When Jesus asks them, "Who are you looking for?" they reply, "Jesus of Nazareth." And Jesus responds, not once but twice. "I am he."

The final time Jesus is identified this way is at the crucifixion. The words are not spoken aloud this time. Instead they are inscribed on a plaque that hangs above him on the cross, where everyone can read them: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Come. See.