

“Ready to Hear the Unexpected?”
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18;
1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51

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Can anything good come from Nazareth? Philip has discovered Jesus and is bringing word to Nathaniel that he’s found the one who seems to be the Anointed of God, the Messiah. But, he’s from Nazareth. Nathaniel immediately speaks the words that come out of his understanding, the ways he’s been taught, the way he grew up, the belief that Nazareth was not a place where anything good could come from.

Can anything good come from Nazareth? He lays bare at least one aspect of the prejudice of his day. Throughout scripture we see others. The Jews and the Samaritans. The Jews and the Gentiles. There was a lot of prejudice against those who were not of their people. Even within that, we know that the Pharisees, for example, didn’t think that shepherds or fishermen could truly be faithful people because they couldn’t do the ritual cleansings that were expected to be one of the really chosen people, one of the Pharisees.

As we see this blatant prejudice come out in Nathaniel, we ask, “Have things changed?” Do we also have attitudes that are so ingrained in us, that we learn without even realizing it, similar to the prejudices about people and places like Nazareth? What are our Nazareths today? What stereotypes do we make? What prejudices do we hold that suggest that nothing good could come from _____ (each of us can fill in the blank for ourselves).

We certainly know that we have a history with at least one kind of prejudice, a prejudice that was built up so that those of European descent could enslave black Africans for many years, and how that has continued to play out in our nation as a prejudice that becomes ingrained in us. As we celebrate Martin Luther King Day on Monday, we recognize that there has been a pushback and recognition of racism and white supremacy in our own country. And yet, we recognize it has not gone away. We still live with ingrained racism and white supremacy in our society, and we see a rise of those who would claim racism rather than see it as an evil.

One of the reasons I think we celebrate Martin Luther King is not only that he pushed back against that racism and white supremacy, but he gave us a vision of something different. He gave us a vision of hope that we could someday overcome that kind of hatred and division. Sometimes I wonder whether it’s truly possible. I wonder how we might move forward.

Again, I look to this story of Jesus’s encounter with Nathaniel. One aspect of this story that seems to be a key is that when Philip invited Nathaniel to come and see, Nathaniel didn’t just say, “I already know nothing good can come from Nazareth. I don’t need to go see.” He was willing, at least, to listen to his friend and test his perception. Test whether there really was, perhaps, something that might be good that would come

from Nazareth. It's that openness to testing our perceptions that challenges us in this passage. There's a way that Jesus is challenging Nathaniel to see something different, something good, in a place that he thought there could only be something bad. Challenging him to see that maybe he's not always right. How challenging it is to be willing to test one's own perceptions and see whether one's understanding is always the right understanding. Whether it actually fits. Whether it really matches reality.

So as Nathaniel came, Jesus recognized who he was—an Israelite without deceit. It seems that Nathaniel wasn't even willing to deceive himself. He was willing to make that move to test his own perceptions. How easy it is for us to deceive ourselves and think we know, and not test, not see, not allow ourselves to be challenged and find what might be real. I know my view of reality is partial. My knowledge of truth is partial. I need the challenge that Jesus brings so that I might see the change Jesus can bring into my life.

So as Nathaniel comes, first Jesus recognizes that he's not trying to deceive himself or anyone else. He comes to check it out. In the conversation, Jesus helps Nathaniel recognize that he is known. Not only that he is an Israelite without deceit, but that he sat under a fig tree. That little statement seems to be a metaphor for Jesus knowing Nathaniel and Nathaniel knowing that Jesus knows him. Being known is incredibly powerful.

The Psalmist today gives that ode to being known by God. Known in our rising and our lying down. Known in our mother's womb. Sometimes it feels like nobody knows us, and yet in these passages we are invited to discover that God does. God knows who we are. And in Jesus knowing Nathaniel, he's inviting him to open up to what Jesus can teach him, what Jesus can show him. And in our being known, we, too, are invited to let Jesus in to show us what he needs to show us. To change us the way we need to be changed. It is as Jesus encounters Nathaniel and Nathaniel is able to open himself to Jesus, to see that he is known, that his life begins to change.

I have a friend who has worked in the Oakland and Berkeley schools teaching young people. He helped change grade schools so that they became better places. One of the things he suggested was that if you really want a young person to learn, let them have a good relationship with their teacher. It is when they are known, when they know that they are cared for, when they are paid attention to, that they can learn. In this passage we are invited to know that God knows us. Jesus knows Nathaniel, knows the disciples who come, and invites us to know we are known and to learn from him.

One of the first learnings in this particular passage is to tell Nathaniel, I think, to be careful of making decisions so quickly. Even if you're right, you are not completely right because you bring an expectation with you about who you think the Messiah is. The thing I think Jesus is saying is to be careful with that quick decision because it is true and not true. It is true I am the Messiah. But it is not true that I am the Messiah you think I am, that all the ways you have described who the Messiah will be are not real.

Again, we get to that point where we build up expectations. We create our own understanding of the way God might work and of the way the world works.

When we come to Jesus, we are invited to let him change us. He says you are going to see things you never would have seen before. You're going to see things differently. That word, seen, means insights and perception as well as visual seeing. Jesus is inviting Nathaniel to recognize not only are his perceptions going to be changed, but he will see things differently. He will be connected to what God is doing because he will see, he will perceive, he will understand some of how God is coming and going. The idea of the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man, I think, is an image suggesting that Jesus will be connected to the will and work of God in his life, and thus engaged in that will and work.

So as we hear this particular passage, it is an invitation to remember that we are challenged to see the ways we see the world that are not God's way. Challenged to open ourselves to Jesus, to come and see what he would show us. Challenged to let him change us so that we might understand the grace of God and the way God embraces all God's people. Change us so that we are connected to God's will and God's way.

We are invited in this passage to accept that challenge, to allow God to change us, and to allow that change to connect us to God's will and God's way. So I invited you this week to think about where you are challenged, how Jesus challenges us to see our own prejudice, to notice the blinders we've had in particular places in our lives, the ways that we are challenged to love, to show grace, to open ourselves again to Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit that we might be changed and connected to God's will and God's way. Amen.