

The Second Sunday After the Epiphany
John 1:43-51

Can Anything Good Come Out of Nazareth?*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
January 14, 2018

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” That’s what Nathanael says to his friend Philip in today’s gospel reading. Philip has just told Nathanael excitedly that he’s seen the Messiah – the one mentioned in the Law and the Prophets – and that his name is Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” replies Nathanael. Some scholars think that this snarky reply was actually the punch line to a first-century Roman joke. Nazareth was on the very margins of the Roman Empire. It was, according to Fr. Jim Martin, the Jesuit writer, a “backwater of a backwater.” No Roman roads passed through it. Its inhabitants were dirt-poor and seen as “throwaway people.”

In fact, everyday life in Nazareth was most likely “filthy” and “unhealthy.” Garbage and raw sewage were dumped outside into the streets and alleyways. The average life expectancy was in the 30s. In the ancient Roman imagination, Nazareth was literally – and pardon my Latin – an s***-hole country. Sort of like what a racist view of Haiti or Africa might be.

And yet Nazareth – this s***-hole country in the middle of nowhere – was the hometown of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Savior of the World. The Messiah was not born to wealthy elites living in luxurious marble and gold-plated estates. Rather, the Messiah was born to throwaway people in an throwaway land. This is what liberation theologians mean by God’s preferential option for the poor. As St. Paul writes in his First Letter to the Corinthians, God chose the foolish to shame the wise. And God chose the weak to shame the strong.

Philip’s response to Nathanael’s comment about Nazareth was simple and to the point. He didn’t try to debate or argue with him. Philip just said, “Come and see.” And, to his credit, Nathanael did come and see.

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, Jesus knew right away who Nathanael really was. In the words of today’s psalm, Jesus “searched him out and [knew] him.” Jesus knew that Nathanael was a sincere person “in whom there is no deceit.” Jesus also knew that Nathanael was a person of deep prayer and study, which is what his sitting under the fig tree symbolized.

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Nathanael, in turn, was radically transformed by his encounter with Jesus. He quickly confessed that Jesus was the Son of God and the King of Israel. Like Philip, he became one of the twelve apostles. And he remained a faithful witness throughout Jesus' ministry. In fact, John the Evangelist tells us that Nathanael was one of the seven apostles who met Jesus by the Sea of Tiberias after the resurrection. Redemption is always possible.

This weekend, we celebrate the life and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Although Dr. King's official feast day in the Episcopal Church is April 4th (the date of his martyrdom), we also remember him in mid-January during this holiday weekend. This year is the fiftieth anniversary of Dr. King's assassination, and his important legacy remains with us to this day.

Dr. King fearlessly engaged with the "Nathanaels" of his day – those racist individuals in the Jim Crow South who repeatedly asked "Can anything good come out of the Negro community?" Like Philip, Dr. King invited them to "come and see" and to be transformed by the gospel.

In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Dr. King wrote to several local clergymen (including two Episcopalians) who had criticized the civil rights movement as untimely, unlawful, and unwise. Dr. King invited them to "come and see" the ways in which the living Christ was manifested within the African American community.

Dr. King told them about the civil rights marchers who faced "jeering and hostile mobs." He told them about the "old, oppressed, [and] battered Negro women" who refused to ride segregated buses. And he told them about the young women and men who were "courageously and nonviolently sitting in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience's sake."

Dr. King invited the white clergymen to "come and see" that those individuals stood for the "most sacred values in our Judaeo Christian heritage." Dr. King hoped that the clergymen would see the light of Christ reflected in those individuals. For Dr. King, the protesters were – in the words of today's collect – "illumined by [God's] Word and Sacraments" and shining "with the radiance of Christ's glory."

As the troubling news of the last few days has reminded us, our nation still has a long way to go with respect to issues of racism and racial prejudice. But there is hope. There is always hope. We know that Nathanael was radically transformed by the gospel and his encounter with Jesus. Indeed, no one – not even the most repugnant and ignorant racist – is beyond God's grace.

So whatever happened to Nathanael after his life-changing encounter with Jesus? According to church tradition, Nathanael (who is also known as Bartholomew in the synoptic gospels) eventually ended up traveling to India and Armenia, and spreading the Good News in those far-away places.

Nathanael, or St. Bartholomew, remained faithful to the gospel to the very end. It is said that he died a martyr by the flaying of his skin. As such, he is the patron saint of leatherworkers and bookbinders. In fact, he is portrayed in Christian iconography as holding a knife. All this because Philip invited him to “Come and see.”

During this liturgical season of Epiphany – a season of discovery and light – there are a number of opportunities for all of us to honor Dr. King’s legacy. Tomorrow, the Diocese of New York will be holding its annual Martin Luther King Jr. celebration at St. James’ Church, Fordham, in the Bronx. The service begins at 10:00 am, with Bishop Dietsche presiding and Bishop Glasspool preaching.

And on Saturday, February 10th, the Diocese will be holding its annual Blessed Absalom Jones celebration at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Absalom Jones was the first African-American priest in the Episcopal Church. Transfiguration will participate in the celebration this year, just as we did last year under the leadership of the late Deacon Sidney Blake. Come and see.

Epiphany is a season of discovery and light. May you be illumined by God’s Word and Sacraments. May your lives be a light to the world. And may you discover, like Nathanael, that the living Christ can come from the most unlikely of places.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Or Haiti? Or Africa? The answer is an unqualified yes.