

What good can come out of Nazareth?

A sermon by the Reverend Sarah Randal, SSM, in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, January 14, 2018.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's good to be back - to begin to get to know you and to feel comfortable here. I appreciate your welcome, and I look forward to talking with you at coffee hour following the service.

Meeting and getting to know each other can be both a delight and a challenge. Imagine for a moment that you're being introduced to someone. In the United States, one of the first things people ask is "what do you do?" That has its issues – but that's for another day. Another question we hear is "Where are you from?" Now, the question "Where are you from" has the potential to capture so much meaning, depending on how it is answered and explored. A resulting conversation could show so much of who we are in so very many directions. Such a question and response provides a window into the other person. Where we're from is very personal. Think of the related expression, "She knows where I'm coming from." It's a feeling of being understood.

But we don't always go there. "Where are you from?" and other such introductory questions can give us the sense that we know all about someone when in fact we have very little idea. Hearing that someone is from Fort Wayne, Indiana, or from Manhattan could lead you to very different ideas – which could be far from accurate. But you know those New Yorkers... Yankees fans, the lot of them.

Too often we think we know where someone is from, box them in, and fit them into our schema of The Way Things Are, and that's that. Even putting people in what we think are GOOD boxes can be problematic because then we aren't seeing or hearing the actual person, but only what we expect.

Jesus had this problem. He might have been born in Bethlehem and been a toddler in Egypt, but he grew up in Nazareth in Galilee, a poor town in a poor region. On the night he was arrested, Peter was identified as one of his disciples by his accent alone.

Jesus got it from home, too. When he preached in his hometown synagogue, people got offended. As they put it,

"Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?" (Matthew 13:55-56)

Which is to say, "Who do you think you are?" We know where you're from, so we know who you are, and we'll judge you accordingly.

Now, really, generalizations are one of the ways the brain makes sense of vast quantities of information. It is when we regard them as hard and fast definitions that we run into trouble. It's when we decide we know enough about people to determine who they are – and we stop listening.

And that's one of the issues we run into in today's Gospel.

Listen again:

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." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Does that sound... eerily familiar to anyone this morning?

Apparently derogatory remarks about poverty-stricken areas and the people who come from them are nothing new. Hearing it from the White House, now, that's something else again. Worse than the profanity, to me, was the press secretary's follow-up, which reminds me of Nathanael's initial attitude. He spoke of (and I quote) "permanent solutions that make our country stronger by welcoming those who can contribute to our society, grow our economy and assimilate into our great nation." Which, as the New Yorker pointed out, suggested "that immigrants from places like El Salvador, Haiti, Liberia, and Sierra Leone couldn't become productive and assimilated American citizens," which is more than a little racist.

Can anything good come from Nazareth?

In the Jesuit America Magazine, Fr James Martin explains, “Nazareth was a minuscule town of 200 to 400 people, where people lived in small stone houses, and, archaeologists say, where garbage, and excrement, was dumped in the alleyways...in other words, came from a place [such as that] Elsewhere in the magazine I read, “Crumbling infrastructure, inadequate health care and crippling poverty do not make a life any less valuable.” True in Jesus’ time. True now. Pragmatically speaking, these things also do not make people less likely to work hard and contribute.

All this turmoil, mind you, was happening on the day before the anniversary of the earthquake in Haiti. Furthermore, Martin Luther King Day is tomorrow. And if nothing else, the events of this past year show you that racism is still one of the biggest problems we have in this country, and we don’t seem to want to deal with it.

But we don’t need to be racist to consider this issue. Can anything good come out of Nazareth/Haiti/Africa/the Midwest/the South/California//the Middle East the other political party? It’s not always demonization. It can even feel perfectly affable. We just KNOW who that person is. So we don’t listen. We can’t see. We don’t try because our minds are made up.

But sometimes we know we have limited vision, and we’re more like Nathanael. “Come and see,” said Philip. And Nathanael did. With a mind sufficiently open to change. What he thought he knew was wrong and he, being without guile/deceit, didn’t hesitate to say so. And thoroughly! “Rabbi, you are the Son of God!” he exclaimed. “You are the King of Israel!”

I want you to notice something here. What made him change his mind is that HE had been seen and known and understood when he hadn’t even noticed Jesus nearby.

“When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

Being seen and known and understood can be life-changing.

Jesus may even have heard his remark about Nazareth – but it didn’t matter. He didn’t dismiss Nathanael as an ignorant so-and-so. He didn’t even wait to be introduced. And this is wonderful.

God doesn’t wait to be noticed. YHWH comes to Samuel before Samuel knows him. In Psalm 139, the poet sings, “You have searched me out and known me... when I was still in my mother’s womb...”

God knows us already – understands us – calls us by name.

The good news is that we, too, are capable of responding to the invitation to come and see. We can also extend the invitation like Philip. We can work to see, hear, and understand others without waiting for them to do the same, refusing to dismiss people as incorrigible. God did it for us, being born among seemingly incorrigible humanity and in a poor, hick town to boot. We can work for those who are constantly facing this kind of dismissal – or worse – on a day to day basis.

And we, like Samuel, can learn to pray, over and over, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

“Where are you from?” we ask.

It’s still a good question. Just depends on what we do with it.