

We return, in our morning's Gospel reading, to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He has just been baptized and he is beginning to gather disciples to share in his ministry. It's an interesting process because not everybody signs up to follow Jesus of Nazareth immediately. At least one disciple has some initial concerns, "Can anything good come from Nazareth," asks Nathanael.

Apparently, where someone is "from" is important in the times the Gospel was written. For example, the writer of John tells us hardly anything about Philip except that Philip was from the same city as Andrew and Simon Peter - Bethsaida. In this morning's reading, Nathaniel is ready to write Jesus off simply because Jesus is from Nazareth.

Of course, that question where does someone come from, is still important to all of us today. We may not understand just how important until we become that person who is from someplace else, when we become that person from someplace strange, or distant, or exotic. This is when we discover an all too common central human concern, the Nathaniel question: Tell me where you are from and then I will judge you.

For example, I am from the United States. Right now, with Obama as President, this is not a bad place to be from. When my husband and I traveled to Europe during the previous President's time, we, more than once, wanted to be from Canada. Still, people who are born here don't generally judge me negatively. Instead, little old ladies stop me and ask me for directions because I apparently look that much like a local.

But I have friends who get stopped all the time and not by little old ladies. On the train, on the street, on the escalator in their workplace. Police and security guards and ticket checkers and bike inspectors stop them because even if they own a German passport, even if they have been here for generations, they do not look like they were born here but instead in Africa or Asia or India. They know - and you know better than I do the Nathaniel question:

*Tell me where you are from and then I will judge you.*

Notice the people who are protesting against immigration. In a way, they are asking all of us, “Can anything good come from Lagos? Can anything good come from Accra?”

*Tell me where you are from and then I will judge you.*

Of course the question is also asked of our neighbors here in this land as well. People from northern Germany tend to compare Bavaria with the state of Texas in the United States, and this is not meant as a positive comparison for either location. “Can anything good come from Munich or Houston?”

*Tell me where you are from and then I will judge you.*

When we ask, “where are you from?” We are asking “are you a member of my tribe or are you an outsider?” Are you one of us or are you one of them?

Nathaniel, who is presumably a resident of Cana since Jesus attends a wedding in the very next chapter of this Gospel, clearly doesn't think much of anyone from Nazareth which is a town about 9 miles away from Cana. 14 kilometers if you are more familiar with the metric system. That's about how far it is from Peace Church to say... Garching where Jenny and Alister used to live. Its like Nathaniel is asking, "Can anything good come from Garching?"

Doesn't it seem a little silly to be so dismissive of anyone from a town so close by? It doesn't matter how far or how near the stranger has traveled, we like thinking we already know everything there is to know about that stranger before we even meet the stranger.

Its the kind of short cut we like to take in our thinking. You know, there is so much to pay attention to in our world every day that we sometimes need to take a few mental short cuts just to get half our "to do" list completed. Plus, if we don't travel very much then we tend to think that our way of doing things is The Right Way, the Best Way. Almost twenty years ago, I came to a conference in Switzerland near Lake Geneva. It was a conference attended by people from all over the world, but mostly from Europe. This was my second trip to Europe and I was thrilled to be here. People would ask me where my immigrant ancestors had come from in Europe and at first I as thrilled to answer them until I started to figure out that they were judging me for not just being an American but for also being Swiss or Scottish or English or German. I listened to a Swiss-French couple tell me that the French were messy people. "Even if the border ran down the

middle of main street, one side would be neat and orderly and the other would be messy?” “Yes,” they replied calmly and with great certainty.

Who do you think this couple missed meeting in their certainty about The French? Who do we miss meeting when we decide that everyone from.... Anywhere... are all slobs or dangerous or stupid or blasphemous or stuck up or criminal or greedy or just plain not good? We judge each other so quickly.

Poor Nathaniel, he came so close to missing the best thing ever. His quickness to judge anyone from Nazareth meant Nathaniel came very close to missing Jesus completely. Yet, he did not miss out on meeting Jesus because Nathaniel decided to accept Phillip’s invitation, “Come and See.”

Stop judging so quickly, Phillip says to Nathaniel. Come and see for yourself, Jesus invites all of us to come and see for ourselves what Jesus is doing.

How we live shapes how we read the Bible, how we hear these stories. If we are someone who hasn’t traveled very much, someone who loves order and everything in its place, then we need to pay attention to Nathaniel. If we get so settled in our life that we think we already know everything, that there is nothing left to surprise us, then we need to pay close attention to invitations that come at us like Phillip’s invitation to Nathaniel. “Come and See.”

If we read the Bible from the point of view of someone who has settled down, who have lived someplace for years and years and never traveled, then this story tells us how we need to be open to the arrival of strangers because sometimes those strangers turn out to be sent by God. Sometimes those strangers are sent by God to change us and bring us closer to God. Sometimes something good does come from Nazareth and Lagos and Houston and Islamabad and Accra and Pretoria and Mexico City and Washington D.C. and even Moscow and London and even - even - the messy side of a French town. We need to be open to the stranger, we need to welcome the stranger, we need to make room for the stranger and so far, many more people in Munich are marching in support of immigration than oppose it. If you think you know Munich, then it is time to Come and See.

On the other hand, many - if not all of us in this room - read the bible from the point of view of being the stranger, the immigrant, the outsider. From the point of view of being the stranger who comes, both invited and uninvited, from other parts of the world - both messy and neat. How do we read this passage when we are the ones in need of being welcomed? How do we read this passage when we are the stranger?

It seem to me that we might start reading this passage with the awareness that we are coming in from the same direction as Jesus. Jesus lived and worked in ministry as a stranger to the community. He lived without a home and he walked from place to place rather than settle in any one city. If he owned anything, as far as we can tell from all four Gospels, it was what he carried or wore.

If you feel lonely or far away from home, you should know that Jesus understands that feeling. If you feel discouraged or overwhelmed, you should know that Jesus understands your situation like someone who has been there and done that. It is true that Jesus chose this life so he could be free to invite all of us to live in his freedom, but it is also true that Jesus knows of your pain in your situation and is at work with you and others to make it better. You will be found.

It seems to me also that when we read this passage as strangers - as asylum seekers, as refugees, as long and short term immigrants, as temporary workers and as ex-pats and long term tourists - perhaps we should be asking ourselves a very important question: “How can we be Jesus to our hosts? How can we be Jesus to the people we are coming to live among?”

Do you think you have nothing to offer? Do you think your poverty, your need means you have no power, no importance?

You are standing where Jesus stood. Look again at how Jesus changes people. Over and over again, Jesus makes an offer of a relationship out of his vulnerability. Remember? He deliberately walks into a strange and uncomfortable part of the countryside, Samaria, and sits down next a well in the middle of a hot day, all by himself, and then he waits for someone to offer him water. Or someone invite Jesus over for dinner. Or someone pulls out a couple of fish and some bread that begins a feast for thousands. Jesus is almost always in a place where his need is actually his invitation to a relationship of transformation.

Then, Jesus starts telling a story. He tells people stories about themselves. He tells them stories about God and then Jesus invites the people to respond. Jesus doesn't demand anyone to change, instead he just offers the opportunity to think about everything, differently.

Nathaniel has a choice. Stay comfortable underneath his fig tree or go and see if anything good can come from Nazareth. Jesus, as the outsider, offers Nathaniel a chance to see everything, differently.

We're outsiders. We also offer to our neighbors the chance to see everything differently. When we come as asylum seekers with little more than what we can wear or carry in our hands, we also come with the same opportunity to change the lives of the people who chose to receive us. Our need, our need for shelter and food and work is an offer to the Nathaniels of Germany and Italy and France and the United Kingdom and the United States and everywhere wealth has been concentrated to wake up, to come and see how the whole world lives. We invite those who have wealth to come out from their fig trees and make room for all of us. When we arrive with our need, we arrive carrying the need of the world with us.

Do you think you have nothing to offer? Your need for help is your transforming power. Your need for welcome, for clothing, for food, for shelter is not your shame. It is the need of the world present in you. People don't change when they read headlines in the newspapers. Its too distant. Impersonal. People change when they see your face and your children's faces. People start to ask, why does this need exist? People sometimes start to ask, how can we change something - what can we change - so that

everyone everywhere is fed and safe and can stay at home, near their family? Your need is important and worthy and honorable. It is one of the ways how to be Jesus toward the community you now live within. Your need invites people around you to change.

But this doesn't justify your suffering. If you suffer, if you are hungry or afraid, you know as well as Jesus knows that this is not what God intends. It is not noble or sacrificial to suffer. It is just plain wrong. Suffering is a sign of dis-order. If your need is ignored or denied then know that denial grieves God. That is the world, not God, broken and turning its face away from you and away from Jesus. That is our human sin.

\*\*\*If you are suffering, searching for shelter and safety and you leave this place this morning still hungry, then I hope at least you know you are sitting with people who know your situation. Who have been in the same tough spot. I hope you do not feel judged but find a community here that will help carry you through. I also hope we do a better job of feeding you.\*\*

If we are not in a place of need, we are in a place of being able to tell the others, "Come and See." We also change the world when we start telling our stories. When we start telling the others about what we have seen and heard and when, we start inviting them to come and see for themselves. Some of us are here for just a little while. We've been given a chance to see God at work in the world in this room. When we go back we should tell our stories not only of massive beer festivals but also about the people we are sitting next to in this room. About what is going on in this world so that thousands of people are willing to get on board a boat that is basically

aimed toward Italy and then left to travel at the mercy of the auto pilot and what is going on in a world where people are making a new life here in this city. We need to tell these stories to our neighbors and family back home and we need to tell these stories to our friends here. This is how we can be Jesus toward our hosts and to each other and to our friends and families back home. This is how we can be Phillip. This is how our vulnerability is our world transforming strength.

Not everyone responded to Jesus invitation. Quite a few turned away from Jesus in the Gospel stories and still today, many many more people turn away. We know just how comfortable it can be to sit underneath the fig tree with its broad leaves that shelter from noontime heat. And it is true. Leaving our comfortable places may mean never returning. So far as we know, once Nathaniel got up to go and see if anything good can come from Nazareth, Nathaniel never went back to his favorite resting place.

Both of this morning's reading - one from the Gospel of John which is one of four stories about Jesus's life and ministry - and the reading from 1 Samuel which is about God at work with God's chosen people are about being called by God. In Samuel's story, he's a young boy asleep in the temple. Yet, God keeps waking Samuel up until Eli helps Samuel understand what is going on. This is bittersweet news for Eli and for Samuel. Eli has fallen short of what God wanted for Eli and for the temple. A child is being sent to replace a old man. In this story we can see how God's call is persistent even as it is invitational. In both situations, the call from God is

to a call to see how God is changing the world, how God is calling the world back into wholeness.

There are two invitations this morning:

1. Come and see.
2. Go and be seen.

God's call to us is to not only be hearers of the word, receivers of Christ but then also be Christ to one another. In our deepest needs, we are Christ at work in this world. In our greatest wealth, we can also be Christ at work in this world. And in all the places we find ourselves in-between, we are still called to be Christ at work in this world.

We are Nathaniel who leaves our comfortable place to go and see if anything good can come from anywhere. We are Phillip who goes to find our friends so that our friends can come and see God's promise fulfilled. We are God's promise in the middle of fulfillment. We are the fulfilling of God's promise.