

**Second Sunday after Epiphany, B.**  
**January 14, 2018. 1 Sam. 3:1-20; John 1:43-51.**

Let's talk about Nathanael. I doubt that many of you inhabit exactly the very narrow corner of the internet that I do: many of my friends are slightly left of Vladimir Lenin and slightly churchier than Thomas Aquinas. It's an odd combination and makes for a very unique echo chamber. In these strange circles where I encounter my friends, Nathanael came in for a whole lot of attention this week, because the kind of prejudice that motivates his initial rejection of Jesus was echoed in the highest corridors of power in our country this week.

This prejudice asserts that there are places where worthwhile people come from, and then there are crap places, whose denizens are not worthwhile. I'm not sure that it makes sense to call Nathanael a racist, because I'm honestly not sure how the concept of race should be applied to ancient Galilee. But this kind of prejudice today often does take the form of racism, and it did this week when poor countries with black and brown citizens were singled out by a white president as places from which the United States should not take immigrants. There was rightfully a lot of outrage this week, and a lot of almost gleeful linking with this biblical text. I swear, this is the most attention Nathanael, a usually anonymous disciple, has ever received.

But amidst all the outrage, it is easy to forget that while the crassness of this administration is abnormal, the prejudice of Nathanael is very much the norm. Philip almost certainly was not surprised by it. Nazareth wasn't a place where cool things happened. Leaders didn't come from Nazareth. They didn't produce the highly skilled tech employees Google and Apple crave. It was a marginal town, far from the seat of power and populated by marginal people.

The shocking thing in this passage is not Nathanael's prejudice, which would have sounded normal within his group of friends, but that the prejudice is wrong. And it is not just wrong because Jesus came from Nazareth, which is a variation on the fallacious "exemplary immigrant" motif. It is wrong from a Christian perspective because it has nothing to do with God. In the normal terms of the world, Nathanael is right: Jerusalem is cooler than Nazareth, as Oak Park is cooler than Powder Springs, Georgia. In the terms of God, this prejudice is always wrong, because every inhabited place is populated with God's own people, created in the image of God. And there is no place in which God is not at work, bringing about the redemption of the world, through the people who are there.

If we were to crack open the bible, we would find in fact that God has quite a habit of doing the greatest work through the last and least. Jesus was a poor carpenter from the sticks. David was the youngest son and his father didn't even think to send for

him when he had an appointment with the prophet Samuel. Moses was an exiled murderer with a debilitating fear of public speaking. Deborah was a woman in a culture dominated by men. The whole nation of Israel was never a sustained world power like Persia or Babylon or Rome, and yet they are the chosen people.

Of course Jesus was from a marginal town like Nazareth, because that is how God works. It is how God still works. This weekend our nation is celebrating the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., a black man in a segregated society in which black men were killed with impunity by white men for appearing to look at a white woman. And this preacher of a marginalized, oppressed race in the marginal South led the greatest Christian moral movement our nation saw last century. Selma isn't so far from Nazareth.

But we can't stop there. Because the west side of Chicago isn't so far from Nazareth, either. And downstate has a little touch of Nazareth, too. And now that I think about it, some of the Housing Forward guests who are being turned away in record numbers this year because the shelters are all full seem a little Nazarene to me. Here's the thing, God who is the center of the universe likes to work from the margins. Which means that if we want to encounter the one who is bringing us back to life we can't afford to stay under the fig tree with Nathanael. And it's not just a case of confronting our prejudices, though that is of course a very good idea. It's a matter also of the very difficult task of focusing our attention on the margins not only of our society, but of our individual lives. God is still calling to us, and there's a very good chance that the call is coming from the places we would rather not go, whatever those places happen to be for each of us.

If we go and see, then we will also have a chance to hear. Nathanael goes and sees and hears the truth about himself: that he's an Israelite in whom there is no deceit. I'm not sure the truth about me would be so gentle. Philip got a head start and he heard a command to follow. Once Samuel had finally figured out who was talking to him, he was told to tell the unpleasant truth to the most powerful person he knew, who also happened to be a father figure to him. I don't know exactly what we will hear in God's call. But there's a pretty good chance that there will be echoes of the calls to these men: that we will learn the truth about ourselves, that we will be called into a closer following of our lord, and that if we heed the call we may end up having unpleasant conversations with people we love and respect. But we may well also see greater things than these, even the glory of the Son of God. Let us with courage and humility go and see. Amen.