

“Come and See - Beyond Biases and Barriers”

January 7, 2018

Scripture Lesson: John 1: 35-51

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? It is one of the surprising sentences in this passage from the first chapter of John. Or, is it very surprising?

We don't know a lot about Nathanael. This is his few minutes of fame as part of the flock of disciples. Somewhere he had learned something about Nazareth that prompted him to say, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

We know that we live our lives with various biases and pre-judgements about people, about places, about various social categories. We can imagine that Nathanael may have learned in the school yard, in conversation at the meal table, in overhearing adult conversations, in listening to the news, that there was something different about Nazareth - maybe it was because it was part of Galilee.

Galilee as a region populated by Jews and Gentiles from several ethnic groups. It is estimated that it was about 60 percent Jewish. Judea on the other hand was over 90 percent Jewish and Judeans were more devout in following laws, paying temple taxes, etc. Galileans were more lax in traditional rituals and more likely to intermarry. Jewish persons in Judea looked down on Galileans as being less pure, if not impure - and purity was important in the faith tradition and thinking of that time.

Social status was important in that culture - as it has been in most cultures. While there was various factors that determine social status in varying contexts, we know that one's social status affects how they are perceived and received.

As we think about Nathanael and his rather awkward - yet honest response - can anything good come out of Nazareth - what comes to our minds? Does this comment connect to or experience? Is there a place, a neighbourhood that you grew up looking down upon? Can anything good come out of ... the other side of the tracks. When I was growing up in Dartmouth in NS, we lived with a bit of an inferior esteem to Halifax, but I also learned from the environment around me an attitude of “Can anything good come out of Preston (which was a black community east of Dartmouth)? When I lived in Saskatchewan, there as a sense in a few communities that I lived - whether there was anything good that could come out of the neighbouring reserves?

Our social status and our attitude about other people's social status is affected by a variety of

factors - and racial realities are part of it.

We don't know if Jesus heard Nathanael's comment. There is a conversation between them that leads to an affirmation of both Jesus and Nathanael. This encounter is part of John's account of the calling of the disciples. A story that includes Jesus inviting the would-be-disciples to come and see.

He didn't check their academic records for theology degrees. He didn't ask for references or background checks. He didn't make them sign a creedal statement of beliefs or even ask them to enter into any covenantal promises. He said, Come and See. Follow Me.

Today, we begin the season of Epiphany - a time when we recognize that our faith story, that God's eternal story includes new insight, and revelation. The season is defined by the story of the visit of the magi and they realize that they have to go home by another way - for political reasons in avoiding Herod, but also for personal and spiritual reasons of transformation.

As we begin this Epiphany season, the Narrative lectionary shifts to the New Testament stories, and we begin a trip through the stories of the Gospel of John. John is different in style and purpose than the other three gospel accounts. It is heavy on symbol and metaphor and doesn't worry so much about details of time and place of Jesus' teaching. This gospel is the last of the gospel stories to be written - around 90 CE - and so it is seeking to interpret the meaning of Jesus' life as the Word made flesh.

John moves quickly into the calling of the disciples and doesn't give a lot of the details. There are no boats or fish left on the shoreline in John's accounts. We hear conversations. John's gospel is more about encounters and conversation with Jesus, than about narrative or biographical detail.

And so, Jesus says, Come and See. It is an invitation into journey and new vision. It is an invitation into mystery and symbol and the mystical. It is an invitation to exploration of the eternal truth and light.

And it is an invitation that surpasses time and transcends culture and place.

Whether you are here for the first time today, or whether you have been in worship most Sunday's of your life - the invitation that is offered each day, each week, each time we explore a scripture story is - come and see.

Can anything good come from the Bible?

As we live in our culture of social status and various factors that contribute to the attitudes and perspectives of our time, we know that much has changed in our culture in the past 50 years about the status of church in our society. Many have moved away from church connection and there are a whole lot of sociological factors that have helped that along. But, one of those is that

many who have brought a curious and exploring mind to the faith encounter have not been invited to come and see but rather been told what to believe and how to behave properly.

As I translate the dynamics of this story into our current reality, I wonder if there are Nathanael's out there who would be asking - Can anything good come out of the Christian faith, the Christian church? Can anything good come out of religion?

Have you ever heard anyone ask that? Have you ever wondered that?

In our time, religion has an image problem, and it would take many sermons to explore the reasons for that - but maybe a lot of them boil down to the reality that maybe there hasn't been enough invitation to explore meaning and life together - come and see.

Epiphany is a time when we can explore what it means to find another way home - another way of seeing, envisioning, living a holy imagination and eternal love.

What are the biases and barriers that make it difficult for us to enter into that invitation to follow the way of Jesus - seeking to sift through the stories, doctrines, hymns, creeds, prayers - to find meaning, purpose, life - greater things that enable the eternal to open up before us as we grasp wonder, mystery, truth and love.

The invitation of Jesus was a call to follow; to risk movement of thought and spirit, attitudes and perspectives so that the biases and barriers are put aside and we can value one another - with our differences and our commonalities.

As we move into this new year and into this season of Epiphany, there are many routines and commitments that continue but there are also possibilities. At Riverside, we continue our Mission Forward process where we are seeking to imagine and articulate a focus for who we are as a community of faith in this time and place.

We are now in the community engagement stage of the process where pairs of Riverside Folk are going to a variety of community organizations to listen to what is happening by other partner groups and to explore the perceived needs in the community. It is a process that includes talking about who we are and I sensed that one of the fears of that process was receiving a response of "Can anything good come out of religion?". But, that hasn't been the experience. There has been an openness and an appreciation that as a church community we are seeking to forge links and connections with others; finding common ground to work towards the common good of our community.

So, as this Epiphany season unfolds let's explore together - with the help of the wonderful stories of John - the possibilities of discovering the revelations of light and truth that will unfold when we have the courage and the grace - to come and see, to come and follow ...