

Sermon-John 1:43-51
Preached at Trinity Presbyterian, Kanata
April 18, 2021

On his way to Galilee, early on in his ministry, Jesus invites his newly formed group of disciples to join him, saying, "Follow me." In turn, the disciples invite others, and Philip invites Nathanael to join them. But Nathanael responds by saying "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

It's a strong assumption, a declaration of doubt, really, but I imagine this is something we can all relate to. Nazareth was a small, secluded village, nothing special really. How could the Son of God, those whom Moses and the prophets wrote about, come from such an insignificant, unimportant place?

People of faith, like Nathanael, and also you and me, make all sorts of assumptions every day. Sometimes are assumptions about other people-how they act, what they believe, and what they are capable of. Sometimes, we make these assumptions about entire groups of people-we make these assumptions because of where they grew up, what they look like, what country they are from, what religion they believe, what political party they support and even what profession they might be from. Because of certain defining characteristics or features, we often assume we know who and what people are like even when we haven't ever met them. Sometimes, these assumptions are rooted in stereotypes, sometimes harmful and other times benign, but they can also be rooted in our own personal experience. Surely nothing good can come from that situation-I should know, I've been there. There are assumptions that we make about others, but there are

also assumptions that we make, and believe, about ourselves, too. We are intimately familiar with our own lives-and even though we may openly celebrate and share the successes in our lives, we are even more familiar with our failures. We know the struggles we face every day-the indecision, the doubts, the illnesses, the addictions, the failures, the grief, the temptations, and the loss that plague us internally, often overshadowing the good parts of who we are in our own eyes. This intimate familiarity can cause us to assume things about ourselves as well. In addition to making the assumption about others-we may also be prone to ask, how can anything good come from me, knowing the full truth about who I am?

Of course, there is always a grain of truth to stereotypes and assumptions. But assumptions and stereotypes never tell the full story, about any person, any place, and certainly not about ourselves. If we never make an effort to see beyond the assumptions, these assumptions can become limitations that close off any possibilities for growth, self-reflection, and change. They can destroy trust, and they can stunt and destroy relationships and understanding before we even begin. The pastor Michael K. Marsh wrote that “Our assumptions deny the possibility of reconciliation, healing, a different way of being, or a new life. (And that) Ultimately, they impoverish our faith and proclaim there is no room for God to show up and act.”

The funny thing about Nathanael is that he doesn't doubt that God is about to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies. He doesn't question that the person whom Philip is inviting him to meet could be the son of God the one whom Moses and the prophets spoke. For him, Jesus' identity as someone holy is not in question- he just can't believe that this person would come from

such a place as Nazareth. How could this be possible? At first glance, a place like Nazareth doesn't seem like the best setting or place for the son of God to be born. Nazareth is too common, too ordinary, too boring for the most important birth in all of history to occur. Shouldn't Jesus have been born in a place that was more important, more special, more holy? If we can look back a few short months after celebrating the birth of Jesus in the Christian calendar at Christmas, we can remember that Nazareth, an unimportant, distant small town, is exactly the kind of place the Messiah would be born in. Not only was Jesus born in a humble town, he was born under the humblest of circumstances-in a manger, in a barn, surrounded by farm animals, born to a young, unmarried girl and her partner, a carpenter. This humility, and simpleness, was not an aberration, it was the point of the incarnation. Emmanuel, God with us, is the God of the people, all people, a savior who would live and work among the common man. I think that Nathanael's assumptions about Nazareth reveal that we have certain expectations and ideas about how and where God should appear and act. But these say more about ourselves, than about God.

Come and see, says Philip. Come and see the good that can come from a place like Nazareth, from a people we have long held assumptions about, from even ourselves. We all have our own Nazareths in our life. Marsh writes that "we think they are about other people, particular circumstances, or even pieces of our lives. But that mostly, our assumptions are about us: our fears, our prejudices, our guilt, our losses, and our wounds. We take our past experiences, real or imagined, and project them onto another person or situation." But assumptions prevent us from evolving and they prevent us from growing. They might keep us safe, but they prevent us

from having a deeper understanding-of other people, of ourselves, and even of God. Because if we can't see how anything good can come out of Nazareth, we have limited everyone, even God, to a box. And we should know, especially by now, that God is present and active in the most humble and unexpected places, as well as with the most humble and unexpected people. Relationships that seem stagnant, people that seem broken or sinful, places that seem hopeless, even ourselves, broken and grieving, these are exactly the places where God shows up. God is always revealing sources of hope and new life where we thought there was only death, possibility when we thought there could only be failure, healing where there is so much pain. Those Nazareths, forgotten, disparaged, overlooked, ridiculed, are exactly the place God desires to reveal Godself.

Marsh writes that "God does not allow himself to be limited by our assumptions. For every Nazareth, there is an invitation to "come and see." For every assumption we make there is a deeper truth to be discovered, a new relationship to be experienced, and a new life to be lived. Our Nazareths become the place of God's epiphany."

Perhaps especially during this time of extended confinement, we can work on breaking down the assumptions we hold about ourselves. As the pandemic continues to force us to be alone with ourselves in ways we weren't before, I invite you to reflect on what an invitation to "come and see" might reveal about your own life. For all of us, this season has required us to reach inside of ourselves and discover deep reserves of patience, creativity and resilience we might have previously imagined to be impossible. Of course, with more time to ourselves, we may also be prone

to self-criticism, doubt, depression, and hopelessness as well. However, I hope that you can move past the limitations and assumptions you have about yourself-and see the whole truth about who you are. We may be full of doubts, imperfections and failures for sure, but we are also full of strength, beauty, resilience, and possibility. We may think of ourselves as Nazareths, ordinary and unimportant people from which nothing special can come. But as we see, there is more happening in Nazareth than Nathanael could have imagined. Not just “anything good” comes out of Nazareth, but Jesus, the one who is the most good, the most just and the most loving comes out of Nazareth. A new way of living and looking at the world is born in Nazareth-one not defined and limited by human assumptions, but rather defined by God’s endless possibilities. That invitation to come and see, is one extended to us every single day. In order to see the fullness and truth about the world around us, we first must confront the truth about ourselves, looking at ourselves through the lens which God, our creator sees us. The words I go back to, over and over again, as I try to remember God’s understanding of the fullness of who I am, come from the Psalmist: *“Oh Lord, you have searched me and known me...for it was you who formed by inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works.”* So come, please, come and see, come and see the good that can come from a place such as Nazareth. It is better than you can even imagine. Amen.