

“CAN ANYTHING GOOD COME FROM THERE?”

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Text: John 1:43-51 (NLT)

God's Word: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18 (NLT)

John 1:43-51 (NLT)

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Come, follow me.”

⁴⁴ Philip was from Bethsaida, Andrew and Peter's hometown.

⁴⁵ Philip went to look for Nathanael and told him, “We have found the very person Moses and the prophets wrote about! His name is Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

⁴⁶ “Nazareth!” exclaimed Nathanael. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

“Come and see for yourself,” Philip replied.

⁴⁷ As they approached, Jesus said, “Now here is a genuine son of Israel—a man of complete integrity.”

⁴⁸ “How do you know about me?” Nathanael asked.

Jesus replied, “I could see you under the fig tree before Philip found you.”

⁴⁹ Then Nathanael exclaimed, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God—the King of Israel!”

⁵⁰ Jesus asked him, “Do you believe this just because I told you I had seen you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than this.” ⁵¹ Then he said, “I tell you the truth, you will all see heaven open and the angels of God going up and down on the Son of Man, the one who is the stairway between heaven and earth.”

A couple of weeks ago I drove to Tennessee to see my family. It's a drive I have made many, many times. It's a drive across Jellico Mountain from Kentucky to Tennessee. I've driven it in the summertime and in the wintertime. Just as you enter Tennessee, you see a lot more of the towns and counties in the wintertime because there are no leaves on the trees. Clairfield is the first exit right inside the Kentucky line and its way off of the beaten path. Because of the terrain, it's not a heavily populated area. There is little industry and a lot of poverty. Through the trees you could see broken down shacks and old trailers with yards filled with old, rusty trucks, and junk of every kind. It's a bit disturbing, sad. There is a big drug problem in the rural mountains. A lot of folks lack education and many people don't work. There is a sort of desperate or perhaps even hopeless feel to some of the areas.

A church that I served in Knoxville adopted Clairfield Elementary School. Twice a year, we would take a tractor trailer load of food, a dump truck of potatoes and a large U-Haul filled with toys to distribute. I have never seen such desperation and hopelessness. It's the stuff you see in commercials from 3rd world countries.

A study came out at the end of 2019 which sited alarming statistics that the suicide rate in Tennessee is at record highs. On average, three human beings a day take their own lives in Tennessee. And the

highest rate of suicide is among poor white men who live in rural areas. Isolated places. Forgotten places. Places where the people don't have much hope. People that live in places like the Cumberland Mountains.

If you think that's bad, for the state of Ohio, suicide has increased by 45% and that statistic was released in November, 2019—pre Covid-19. 37 counties are above the national average. 5 people die by suicide every day and 1 youth dies by suicide every 33 hours. I can't even imagine what the statistics show now that we have lived with Covid and isolation and job loss and financial woes and sickness and...the list goes on and on.

Nazareth was such a place—much like Clairfield, I would guess. In Jesus' day, Nazareth was a village of about 150 people. It didn't have any industry of its own. It depended, economically, on the city of Sepphoris, which was the capital of Galilee.

The people in Nazareth were not of the educated class. If they were able to earn a living, they did it by the sweat of their brow. They struggled horribly. They didn't feel very good about themselves, nor did they have a lot to aspire to.

Ancient scholars, and I looked up a lot of them for this sermon, tended to agree that the inhabitants of Nazareth were looked down upon by the neighboring towns and cities. One scholar wrote that "The character of Nazareth was proverbially bad. To be a Galilean or a Nazarene was an expression of decided contempt...the people were thought to be wicked." Another scholar writes: "The whole country of Galilee was in contempt with the Jews; but Nazareth was so mean a place, that it seems it was even despised by its neighbors, by the Galileans themselves."

Nathaniel was a Galilean, and even he was startled when he heard from his brother: "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked."

Have you ever wondered that same thing about a place or a person or perhaps an entire group or race of persons? Perhaps you have wondered that about yourself?

"Can anything good come out of me?" I've wondered that many times.

I was speaking to someone a few weeks ago. And she was talking about the God's Open Pantry here at the church. She said, "There was a time in my life when I needed a food pantry, and it was there for me. I've never forgotten that. It meant so much to me. Don't ever get discouraged or think you aren't making a positive difference, because you are."

How are you feeling this morning? What brought you here? What made you tune in? Are you feeling good? Has it been an inspiring week? Or has it been awful? Do you feel like you are at the end of your rope? Do you feel like you aren't good enough to be here? Do you wonder how or if God even loves you?

I'm here to tell you one thing—God does love you!!! God loves you no matter who you are, what you have done, or where you are from!!!

Our Gospel Lesson for this morning reminds us that God does not see as we see. God's vision is deeper, wider, and more accurate. And it's a vision to which Jesus calls us, and helps us to develop.

"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael has some opinions, some assumptions, about Nazareth. Do you ever make assumptions?

- "I've seen his type before; he'll never change."
- "She's always so negative; I know what she will say."
- "He won't understand; he never does."
- "It's always been like that; it will never get any better."
- "Nothing good can come of that situation."

People of faith, people like Nathanael, people like you and me, make these and all sorts of assumptions every day. Sometimes our assumptions are about other people. Other times we look at particular situations: our marriage, the state of our country, a teenager trying to grow up and we declare it hopeless. We are sure nothing good can come out of that situation.

Then there are times when we look at ourselves or a part of our life; maybe it's a secret we have carried for years, the illness we face each day, the addiction we hide, the hurts we have caused, the loneliness and loss of grief, and we say it will never get any better. How can anything good come out of this?

The assumptions we make can destroy relationships, love and life. Often, we think we know more than we really do. Assumptions act as limitations. It's like racism, sexism, and classism. These things narrow our vision. They close off the possibility of change and growth.

Our assumptions can deny the possibility of reconciliation, healing, a different way of being, or a new life. Ultimately, they impoverish our faith and proclaim that there is no room for God to show up and act.

It's no coincidence that Nathanael was sitting under the fig tree when he makes his comment about Nazareth. After all, it's the fig tree that gave Adam and Eve the leaves they used to hide from God and themselves. It's the fig tree that Jesus will later curse for producing no fruit, no signs of life.

Assumptions become our hiding places. They are not fruitful. They keep us from engaging in life, ourselves, each other and God at a deeper level.

I mean, think about it. Countless biblical stories remind us that God works in people and places we least expect.

- David, the youngest and least accomplished of Jesse's sons was anointed to be King of Israel.

- Solomon, the son born out of a union tainted by adultery and murder helps bring about Israel's golden era.
- Moses asks God how God can send someone who stutters to be God's spokesperson before Pharaoh, the world's most powerful ruler.
- The impulsive and denying Peter becomes the leader of the apostles.
- Paul, the terrorizer of the Early Church converts into its greatest missionary.

Over and over again, God takes ordinary, fallible humans and does great things. God has created each one of us with great potential to be an instrument of God's love and grace. Don't let assumptions from yourself or others get in your way of being who God has called you to be.

I know it's just so hard to see how anything good can come out of Nazareth. We cannot believe that God could be present, active and transformative in Nazareth whether it be a homeless person in line for food, a rebellious young person, a selfish rich person, a complaining neighbor, or our own life. It's so hard to see life in the midst of death, hope in places of despair, and the good and the beautiful in what looks like the bad and the ugly.

But, hey, our faith all hinges on Jesus being raised from the dead—and thus raising us from the dead as well!!! Nazareth is the place where God transforms, heals and reveals Himself. Thankfully God isn't limited by our assumptions. For every Nazareth, there is an invitation to "Come and See."

Look at the story. Jesus calls Nathanael out from under the fig tree. And Nathanael goes. He chooses to give Jesus a chance. How easily he could have said, "It's not worth my time." Or, "What could He possibly do for me?" And he may have thought these very things—he probably did—but he still went. He placed himself in a position to meet God.

Whenever we heed God's call to leave the fig tree we open ourselves to see God present and at work in the most unexpected places and people. And the old assumptions fall and a new life and a new world arise. The fulfillment of God's promises and earthly life happen in Nazareth. The last place we would have thought possible is often the first place God chooses.

"Come and See." Our salvation and healing happen where we thought nothing good could happen. Reconciliation and love are revealed in relationships we were certain nothing good could come from. The seemingly hopeless situations of life begin to bear fruit. Words of forgiveness and compassion are spoken by people we were sure could never say such things.

God puts life back together in Nazareth. There is more happening in Nazareth than we ever thought possible. You see, not just "anything good" comes out of Nazareth, The One Who is Good comes out of Nazareth!!! Praise God.

Amen.