

Don't Believe Everything You Think

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...

In our lesson this morning (from the 1st chapter of John's Gospel) we're given a glimpse into the very early days of Jesus' ministry (where he's gathering together his first group of disciples)... Philip, who we're told was from Bethsaida (an area where Jesus had both a significant ministry and an equally significant rejection of his ideas) tells Nathaniel that he has found the one that "*Moses and the prophets wrote about – Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth*"...

Now I'm going to guess that you know very little about Nathaniel (and the only reason why I say that is because he's mentioned only 6 times in the New Testament) - sometimes as Nathaniel - and other times he's referred to as Bartholomew... but what most people do know about him (is how he responded to Philip's invitation to meet Jesus)...

And what does he say?... he says, "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*"... In other words, Nathaniel was a man who had strongly formed opinions, held onto his own limiting beliefs, and viewed the world with what some might call 'assumptions'... Can anything good come out of Nazareth?...

Today we might hear those words echoed in the one who says, "Oh, I know people like that; they never change"... or, "He's always so negative, I bet I can tell you exactly how he'll respond"... or, "It's always been this way, and it will never get any better"... these are what some might call 'limiting beliefs' (or what *you and I might call* 'assumptions')... Can anything good come out of Nazareth?... we ask with doubt, when our hopeful expectations - are low...

And the truth is that all people (even people of faith, like Nathaniel – and like you and me) make these types of assumptions all the time... we make assumptions about people (by the way they dress, how they speak, what they think or what they believe)... perhaps where they come from (or sadly, in some cases - how they vote)...

Other times we make assumptions about particular situations – the Middle East, for instance, or the state of our nation... a troubled marriage, a teenager who's in trouble with the law... and we see these things and become certain (with our limiting beliefs) - that nothing good can come out of those situations...

And sometimes our limiting beliefs and assumptions are even aimed at ourselves (or a specific area of our lives) – and it might relate to an addiction that we hide away, an illness that hinders our lives, a job that we hate, or even the pain of grief, loneliness, depression, or despair (which can lead us to believe that nothing will ever get better)...

And so often we think to ourselves, “What good can come out of these things?”... what good can come out of Nazareth?...

Now, I realize that most people are often not aware of their limiting beliefs (and even more people feel comfortable defending their assumptions)... but I agree with the saying that, “*our assumptions are the windows into our world*” – and not only do they effect our relationships, our ability to love, our lives, and our level of overall well-being - but they can also limit us (and give us a narrow vision of the world)... and I say that, because when we think we know so much it can close off the possibility of change and growth (or take away the possibility of reconciliation, healing, a different way of being or thinking, and even the possibility of a new beginning)...

But what’s even worse – like wondering if any good can come out of Nazareth – it’s our assumptions that impoverish our faith (and prevent us from seeing new possibilities *in what the Lord can do* in our lives today)... and who we can become as Children of God...

Maybe that’s one of the reasons why we read that Nathanael is found sitting under the fig tree... and yes, on the one hand ‘*to sit under the fig tree*’ was a figure of speech for someone who studied the Torah – but it was also the fig tree that gave Adam and Eve the leaves to use (when they wanted to hide from God)... it was the fig tree that Jesus curses when it refused to bear fruit... and when we hide behind our assumptions of what God can and cannot do in the world today (it can also prevent our faith from bearing fruit - in our own lives as well)...

Now, that’s not to say that Nathanael lacked all faith... and I say that because, like all good Jews, Nathanael was indeed hoping to find the one whom ‘*Moses and the prophets spoke about*’ (as Philip promised) – but what he couldn’t believe was that such a promise that he had hoped for (could be found in Nazareth)... just like many people struggle to believe (in what God can do in their lives today)...

And so, why did Nathanael have trouble believing that God would do something wonderful in Nazareth (of all places)?...

Well, some people have argued that Nathanael's prejudice related to the fact that Nazareth was a backwards, hick town made up of ignorant people (who lived on the wrong side of the tracks)...

And yet, I disagree with that notion... and I only say that because after being to Nazareth a couple of times I have learned that the town was actually centered in between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean – two trade routes... (as well as being situated somewhat close to the Via Maris) which was the main trade route by land that extended throughout Israel and into both Europe and Asia...

(which means that people who lived in Nazareth had exposure to a great exchange of ideas, language, and people... and in that way, Nazareth was somewhat cosmopolitan)...

But the reason for Nathanael's question about *anything good coming out of Nazareth* is that Nazareth was never mentioned (even once) in the Old Testament (as a place where God might act)... in fact, it's not mentioned at all (not even by the prophets)... and so Nathanael just assumed that Jesus couldn't be the one he was looking for (because holy things happen in holy places – not on the edge of some *unknown town*)...

And yet, in this story 'Nazareth' represents how God will not allow Himself to be limited (or contained) by any one of our assumptions (or by our limiting beliefs in the power of what God can do)... how (just as it was with the invitation for Nathanael to 'come and see') our own eyes could be opened to see the presence of God today - if only we're willing to put away our assumptions (of what God is *supposed to do* - and where God is supposed to *show up*)...

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?... Yes, because as we see in this story (there is no such thing as a hopeless place (or a hopeless situation) – only people who grow hopeless about them... and as people of faith (we know that with Jesus we will never be hopeless))...

Come and see!...

I want to close with a story that I saw in a documentary a while back (about a woman named Joana Flanders-Thomas)... she grew up in South Africa during the Apartheid (and as a black woman she experienced a difficult life – as you can imagine)... but what inspires me about this woman is that even in the most difficult times of her life (like the ones we're experiencing today) she used her faith to see her through... and the way she did that was by being a compassionate

heart in this world... leading with love and lifting up the people around her (even when she was down herself)...

To keep a long story short – one day when she was praying the *Lord's Prayer*—especially the verses “*thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven*” - she realised it was not always true—God's will was not being done in many places... and she wanted to experience more in her relationship with the Lord (to experience more of his closeness in her heart)

And it led her to bring the light of God to the most violent prison in South Africa, the Pollsmoor maximum security prison, was just a few minutes from her home... It had a brutal history—279 acts of violence in one year; severely crowded, under funded, and a true Nazareth in every sense of the word... it was the same place that Nelson Mandela spent a period of his own time while serving a unfair sentence of his own...

And Joanna made a promise to the Lord to visit the prison each day (and she promised that she would bring all the goodness she could gather into her heart... and with it she brought a simple message of forgiveness and reconciliation - and slowly she won the inmates' respect - and started Bible study groups – and prayer groups – and groups that came to worship (in a place that some would see as a Nazareth)...

What is amazing about her witness (and the way that God can use anyone who's willing to follow Jesus) - the crime inside the prison dropped to only two incidents per year (and the stress level inside for all of the inmates also dropped considerably – so much so, that prisoners were more inclined to attend classes (which might provide jobs upon release)... a huge hope of it's own...

And I love what she is quoted as saying in a London Times article... she says, “God is everywhere – even in the worst of prisons... It just needs someone with a heart of compassion to make him known.”...

Friends, I share that story with you this morning to remind you that good things can still come out of Nazareth (especially your own Nazareth) if only you'd be willing to follow Jesus (and trust that God can do unexpected things - in unexpected places – in unexpected ways)... even today...

Come and see...

In Jesus name we pray. **Amen!**

