

^{NRS} **John 1:43** The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee.

He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.”

⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.

⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”

⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?”

Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

⁵⁰ Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.”

⁵¹ And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

My AHA moment came this week upon reading our Gospel text from John 1. I started with the question, like Nathaniel, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth” and I am left with new insights into the nature of God.

“Can anything good come from Nazareth” timeless words that seem to get my brain thinking that maybe there is more to this story than just a strange conversation between Jesus and one of his disciples.

I start asking the text, “Who is this man? This Nathanael? Why is his story so unique in our gospel? What is it about Nathanael’s encounter with Jesus that sets him apart? Why is it that this is the only interaction that we have with Nathanael in the whole of the gospels?” And what’s with this question “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

Now, for clarity’s sake, many of us think that Nathanael and Bartholomew are one and the same disciple – because both are mentioned in the company of the disciple Philip. And I tend to agree with that – but I’m always curious about why they have different names.

Bartholomew means “son of the plowman” or farmer – one who works hard with his hands to produce a crop. Nathanael means “God has given” – maybe the reason why he is called Nathanael in the Gospel of John is because of the meaning of this name. Here, in this text, he is not known by what he does or has done, but rather what God has given and he has accepted.

Either way, Nathanael's story is an important story in our context today because in it Nathanael speaks our burning unspeakable doubt filled questions: ***"Can anything good come from Nazareth" and "Where did you get to know me?"***

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

That was Nathanael's question when his friend Philip told him about a man named Jesus, who was the son of Joseph from Nazareth.

Nathanael, was a scholarly sort, studying the scriptures in the shade of a fig tree. He knew the law of God, the writings, and the prophets.

So, when Philip came to him all excited about this Jesus fellow who had just extended an invitation to become a disciple, Nathanael was just a bit sceptical. Nazareth was a nowhere place, a hole-in-the-wall kind of town with not much of anything going for it...except possibly this man.

Its no wonder that Nathaniel asked, *"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"* And Philip, challenged him to *"Come and see."* And Nathaniel did.

Can anything come out of places or people we don't particularly like? Retired Pastor and friend Peter Haynes, links the story of Nathanael's calling with Samuel's story.¹ When we first encountered Samuel, he was just Hannah's unfulfilled yearning. She prayed with her whole being – risking scorn from the priests. However, God answered Hannah's prayers, and the birth of Samuel ended her childlessness. In fulfillment of her vow to God, Hannah left her newly weaned son at the Temple in Shiloh to be raised a servant of God by the priest, Eli.

God has a peculiar habit of showing up in strange people and places. Like in the story that Greg read to us where Samuel heard the voice of God calling him in the night.

Scripture says that *"the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread"* (3:1b)

However, God had a different idea, a consistent dream for his people. And young Samuel was a part of that dream. God called his name. After a few false starts, Samuel and Eli got it straight and Eli finally recognized a familiar voice, though it was addressed toward an unexpected direction. Later, when Samuel recounted the word of the LORD to Eli, Eli was able to finally recognize the voice of God coming from this unexpected place and replied, "It is of the Lord, let God do what seems fit to him" (3:18).

Can anything good come from Hannah? Can anything good come from being tutored by Eli? Can the voice of God come from a child? God seems to think so.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

¹ Haynes, Peter. "Can Anything Good Come out of Nazareth?" Web log. *The Rock* (blog), 2003. <https://rockhay.tripod.com/sermons/2003/03-01-19.htm>.

One of the things that I really love about Jesus is that he takes this question from Nathanael in stride. Willard Swartley entitles his commentary on verses 46-48 as “Jesus and Nathaniel Spar to Know one another.”²

Swartley says, “Nathanael's response to Philip is low key, with a dubious inference, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip's response repeats what Jesus said to the first inquirers from John's followers, “Come and see.” And so, Nathanael goes to meet this man from Nazareth. When Nathanael approaches, he hears Jesus declare something about him that changes his mind about who and what Jesus is. Jesus’ words astound, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit [guile, KJV]!”

Ok, we may not be astounded by those words, but clearly Nathanael was. Jesus was comparing Nathanael to Jacob from the Old Testament.

Jacob, as many of us know, was fairly deceitful – in fact, the name, Jacob means “The supplanter” referring to how he tricked his brother, Esau out of his birthright. Jacob, after wrestling with an angel, was given the new name, “Israel”. Israel, in fact, means, “one who wrestles with God” But Jacob/Israel, was still known for his deceitful behaviour.

For Jesus to call Nathanael “a true “Israelite” in whom there is no deceit” is, not only extolling Nathanael’s character as being truthful and honest but it is also connecting him – personally - with Jacob as one who “wrestles with” and “sees” God.

Jesus referred again to this comparison at the end of the scripture we read today when he said, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man’ alluding to Jacob’s vision of the angels ascending and descending the ladder from heaven.

Wrestling with this declaration, Nathanael asks, “How did you know this about me?” and Jesus replies “I saw you under that fig tree before Philip called you.”

How did Jesus figure out all of that just by seeing Nathanael sitting under a fig tree? Swartley says, “Under the fig tree may be descriptive of Nathanael's character...The fig tree image in Judaism connotes shalom, meditating on and keeping the law, [abstaining from] evil and doing good (1 Kings 4:25; Mic 4:4; Zech 3:10).” Hence when Jesus says he saw Nathanael “under the fig tree” he witnessed Nathanael’s quality of character – as one who seeks to see God and do God’s will.” As to whether he actually “saw” Nathanael, we don’t know – but we trust that Christ, as son of God, was and is able to make such judgements about us.

God knows all about us – knows us better than we know ourselves. Obviously, then, God can see in others what we ourselves are unable to perceive. The same is true of us personally – God sees in us what others/or even we ourselves are unable to see. And God is not upset or offended at our doubts or mutterings “can anything good come from this?”

² Swartley, Willard M. Essay. In *John: Believers Church Bible Commentary*, 80–83. Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2013.

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" is what Nathanael asks, and Jesus, instead of being offended, engages with Nathaniel. Nathanael, in turn, is forever changed by his encounter. Can anything good come from an unexpected place? We grow so accustomed to things happening in particular ways, that we often lose track of the fact that once upon a time those ways were brand new, untried, and not yet proven true.

What if, we, like Nathanael, without deceit and guile, ask questions and actually listen to those who we might otherwise overlook as being from the wrong place, the wrong family, the wrong school, or the wrong ethnicity, denomination, or point of view.

God speaks through so many different voices – loud or quiet – great or small. It must be said, though, that God does speak in familiar ways and people, as well. But this is not the way it **has** to happen. God is not locked into a particular way of operating. God is radically free to do and love as God sees fit.

But it all goes back to the basic question, *"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"* Until we are able to say "Yes, something good **can** come out of Nazareth!" and start listening for God to speak in unexpected directions - in other people, or in ourselves - then these words will be as true of us as they were of Eli's generation: *"The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."* Praise God that Jesus and those whom he has sent continue to invite us to *"Come and see."*