

## **“Anything Good?”**

January 17, 2021

*Good News for a New Year* series

Rev. Dr MLK, Jr Day weekend – Livestream

If you have a mirror nearby, get ready. Pick it up and take a look. What do you see? Anything good? Do you see a beloved child of God? That’s who you are. That’s who God sees.

Last week, we reaffirmed our baptism and claimed God’s grace at work in us – and even more heard the challenge of God’s grace pushing us to do the work of renouncing, rejecting, and resisting evil, repenting of our sin, trusting Jesus, and doing good in service to him. I hope that when you’ve touched water this week, you’ve remembered your baptism with thanksgiving and felt the nudge of the Holy Spirit to pray and act in holiness.

Remember in John’s Gospel that we’re told right at the beginning who Jesus is – the Word made flesh who came to live among us – full of grace and truth. Jesus is the incarnation of God. And when he starts to call disciples, his invitation is simply “Follow me.”

It’s those first disciples, like Philip, who then extend that invitation simply with an offering to others: “Come and see.” We’ve found the One! It’s Jesus – a carpenter’s son from Nazareth.

*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?* Nathanael’s less than enthusiastic reaction comes because of Nazareth’s reputation. I appreciate that Nathanael’s story is included in John. He’s honest and even shows some resistance to Philip’s announcement. Nazareth was a nowhere town with no power or prestige. It was the boonies. There’s no reason that the Messiah would come from Nazareth. But Philip simply says, “Come and see.”

This is a good point to stop and tell you that Nathanael’s question is important. *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?* Sometimes I’ve rushed over it and haven’t paid much attention to it, but we need to hear it. As we look in the mirror and understand ourselves as beloved, we’re also called to see one another as beloved – created in God’s image, able to be used for God’s good purposes.

I usually read Nathanael’s question in a sarcastic tone. He makes a judgment here – assuming something about Nazareth – this small town where no one would guess that anything important could happen, this place from where no one important would come. *What good can come from there?* There’s nothing special or significant about it – nothing that says “Messiah’s place.” The prophets hadn’t written about it. How could

God – why would God – work through a man from there – a place like that? It’s unthinkable that God’s grace would come through the unexpected.

Nathanael’s question challenges us because we have our own ways of asking similar questions. *How can anything good come from there?* Consider that Nathanael’s presumption and assumption might be similar to our own prejudices and judgments about people, places, and situations. It’s uncomfortable – maybe even difficult to admit. But part of the Good News of Jesus Christ is that it exposes our sin. The Gospel is Good News because it calls us to confess, repent, and receive forgiveness from God.

It didn’t take long for me to build a list of times when I’ve assumed that it’s hopeless or impossible for God to work through a certain person, situation, or even in a particular place. Whether it’s a different part of Muskegon, a street I avoid, a small town off the beaten path, a place where many live in poverty, or a “good neighborhood” without any perceived problems, it didn’t take long for me to realize that I can hold tight to prejudice. I make assumptions about people based on where they’re from, what they do, who their friends are, how they speak, and the list goes on.

I don’t always approach others with grace or openness, but God keeps offering opportunities to meet new people and be confronted by my assumptions and prejudices – and to come to God in prayer for forgiveness and grace. I’ve literally been stunned into silence in moments when I realized my own prejudice. It’s happened with colleagues in ministry. It’s happened with people I’ve served alongside in ministry. It’s happened with strangers. It happens when I take time to get to know someone beyond my assumptions. It happens when I listen and learn – and grow and change. It happens all the time.

Now I understand that may be a little different than Nathanael meeting Jesus, but the concept is the same. Jesus breaks down barriers – between us and God and between us and others. He calls us to create community with one another through him. He is the focus of our unity. He is the center that binds us together in a faith community.

This season after Epiphany is about living in the light of God’s love. Light exposes what we need to see – even the things we don’t want to see. This past week, our small group that’s been focusing on anti-racism work read and discussed Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s letter written from jail in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. Perhaps you’ve read it before, and maybe you know the reason he wrote it – as a response to a letter he received from a group of white pastors, including Methodist bishops, telling him that the work he was doing in Alabama was “unwise and untimely.”

I commend it to you for the powerful sermon it is – and the challenge it offers, especially for anyone who follows Jesus. Rev. Dr. King calls out our tendency to be moderate when it comes to injustice, notes “the appalling silence of good people,”

reminds us that “the time is always ripe to do right,” and invites us to work passionately for love and justice. This week, King’s daughter posted this: As my father said, “Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.”

I’ve read Rev. Dr. King’s letter before, but it sounded different considering this moment as we see the U.S. Capitol surrounded by troops for protection and state capitols on alert – and all that’s been exposed over this past year. Racism and all that goes with it isn’t new, but we’ve seen it exposed clearly and on full display.

And we’ve seen those who would seek equality and justice marching and chanting – reminding us that the struggle is real. We may not understand it because of power and privilege we have, but it’s real. We need to listen and read to understand injustice from those who experience it and what it costs our human family. We need to pray for justice. We must work for justice that makes for peace rather than resting comfortably in our places of privileged complicity. If we want beloved community, we must build it.

I’ve read this Gospel passage many times, but Nathanael’s question caused me to pause and consider the times I’ve assumed that I know how God works, and where God works, and through whom God works. There are times I’ve sought to limit God’s work to a certain place or certain people – without regard for the Good News that is clear throughout Scripture – that God works through people without regard to their age, gender, cultural background, race, or any other category that we use. Thankfully, we have the opportunity every day to seek God’s will and way. We have the call to follow Jesus. **SHOW SLIDE:** It is never too late to give up your prejudices.

A disciple is someone who listens and observes from a teacher, and then goes out to teach others what he or she has learned. It’s a passing on of information – in this case, a passing on of the truth about who Jesus is, about what God wants people to do and to be. It’s also entering into life with Jesus - following him and sharing his love that you’ve experienced with others.

Discipleship isn’t limited by our human categories; God works through our diverse humanity in amazing ways! Discipleship is only limited by our unwillingness to follow where Jesus leads and share the Good News of God with others. Discipleship is limited by our lack of humility and our unwillingness to honor one another’s story as a part of who we are as God’s beloved.

Dr. Walter Brueggemann lifts up Rev. Dr. King’s work for God and call from God, but he says, “that doesn’t let the rest of us off the hook. The same mandate is available to those of us who are less gifted and all that. We are entrusted with the same vision, with the same scriptural tradition, and with the same work to do. So, we cannot just turn it over to a few designated agents...” It’s clear from the beginning that Jesus calls us

all to do that work so that the Kingdom of God is real. It's not one person's job; it belongs to all of us!

Find your mirror again. What do you see? Anything good? Yes! We are disciples of the One from Nazareth who knows us and loves us. We are a community of faith of imperfect people who are the Body of Christ. We are those through whom God can work to share Good News – the love of God that builds us up and makes us whole. In the words from one of our bishops this week, we are called to “serve as the ambassadors of love, grace, peace and justice that once and for all tear down the strongholds of hatred, oppression, and division among us.”

May God hold us and help us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.