

Can Anything Good Come from There? – John 1:43-51

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Today in this text, we're introduced to a man named Nathanael. We don't know much about him. He is not included in any lists of the disciples anywhere in the gospels. He appears nowhere else in the New Testament, except after the resurrection, where we learn that his hometown is Cana and that Jesus appeared to him and several other disciples while they were fishing (John 21:2).

So, with regard to him having any prominence in any gospel narrative, this is it. This is the only insight we have into him.

The one take away about him we glean from the early verses of this passage is that Nathanael is skeptical. He's skeptical that Jesus could come from a place like Nazareth. When Philip approaches him here and says to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth," Nathanael asks this famous question: Can anything good come from Nazareth?

Nathanael and many others at that time thought that God's anointed one surely would appear in or near the great city of Jerusalem, site of political and economic power, religious authority, and God's own dwelling place in the Temple.

"If not there, then at least a place to display holy grandeur or kingly authority—in today's terms, perhaps leading a parade in New York City or a March on Washington, streaming on multiple digital platforms or preaching from the center of a massive stadium, surrounded by gilded props and supported by an entourage of beautiful people." (Audrey West, *Working Preacher*)

But not from a place like Nazareth, a place so distant from the center of power.

Nazareth was a small town, probably religiously conservative, particularly compared to the more cosmopolitan (but still overwhelmingly Jewish) city of Sepphoris, a couple of hours' walk away.

That's really all we know about it. So, what fueled Nathanael's skepticism of Nazareth? We can only speculate. Was there some sort of rivalry between Nazareth and Cana, the town from which Nathanael came? Maybe the residents of Cana, like Nathanael, were naturally skeptical of anybody from the next small town over.

Many of you know that I grew up in a small town in northwest Iowa, Orange City. Its population is about five thousand people. Ten miles to the northwest is a similarly-sized town called Sioux Center. Since the beginning of time, it seems, these two towns have been rivals. And it's largely because they are so alike. They're about the same size, their schools and their sports teams are both high-quality, they each have a small college in them (slightly different religious affiliation, but still pretty similar). They compete with each other in attracting businesses and industries. They both were founded by Dutch settlers back in the day.

So, because they're so similar, citizens put up walls at times between each other. If you're from Orange City, you're definitely not from Sioux Center. And if you're from Sioux Center, you're definitely not from Orange City.

When we placed my dad into memory care last June, the only available facility in the area was in...Sioux Center. My dad had a long history of declaring that he would never live in Sioux Center, shop in Sioux Center, go to the doctor in Sioux Center, or do anything else over there. And yet, this memory care facility (and a very fine one, as it turned out) was in Sioux Center.

On one of the first days Dad was there, he and my mom were eating lunch in the dining room. And as they sat with some other residents and spouses around one of the tables, the topic of where everybody was from came up.

"Where are you from?" someone asked. They went around the table. "We're from Orange City," said my mom and dad. "I'm from Sioux Center," said another and another and another. They got to this final woman at the table who wasn't shy about declaring her allegiance proudly: "Sioux Center," she bellowed, "from the womb to the tomb."

Now, had my dad been of right mind at that point, he not only may have had a word with her, but he may have gotten up to leave the table, and he would've perhaps even demanded to get in the car and leave that place and drive out of town to never return again. Such was that intense rivalry between the two towns and their citizens.

"Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Nathanael asked. Can anything good come from Sioux Center? Can anything good come from Orange City? Rivalries breed skepticism.

In the skeptical world we live in, we're asking these questions all the time of people who probably shouldn't be rivals but who we end up making rivals.

Can anything good come out of...the Republican party? Or the Democrat party? Can anything good come out of our elite universities these days? Or a community college? Can anything good come out of the Catholic church? The Presbyterian church? The big non-denominational church? Or any church for that matter?

Here's the thing about rivalries: the most ferocious rivalries are between parties that are usually quite alike. They have so much in common, they're so equal in so many ways that it breeds contempt.

The oldest rivalry in the National Football League is widely believed to be that between the Green Bay Packers and the Chicago Bears. They're two of the oldest franchises, they exist in close proximity to each other, and have been playing each other forever.

Well, last Sunday the Packers beat the Bears for the tenth straight time, fueling some to ask if it's even a rivalry anymore. Because, the best rivals are mostly equals in strength.

Rivals have more in common than they have differences. And if we could remember that, imagine the unity we might find.

As the year's presidential election process begins with the Iowa caucuses this coming week, it's both interesting and discouraging that our politics have become so polarized that the mindset of candidates from both parties these days is that victory means conquering for their beliefs and their own supporters, even it means disregarding their opponents' interests and supporters. It's all about bludgeoning—bludgeoning the other side,

rather than being an elected official who legislates or governs with the interests of all citizens in mind.

Again, rivals may have differing philosophies, but they're also so similar. We all want the same things: prosperity. And it's a shame that the other side seems to speak as if one side doesn't matter.

Maybe when the candidates are asking, "Can anything good come from them?" they need to heed the invitation that Philip issued to Nathanael: "Come and see."

The anointed Messiah is from Nazareth? Come and see.

Even today, some are reluctant to believe that Jesus might exist amid our rivals. Amid the workings of the other political party? In another church tradition or an entirely different religion even? In that little redneck town Lenoir City? In well-to-do and snooty Farragut? In Kentucky?

And sometimes it's hard to imagine that Jesus would be present in places that aren't our rivals but just seem unlikely places for the divine to hang out. The mental health facility, the strip club, the country store, the rubble of a bombed-out building in Gaza or Ukraine.

Can anything good come out of those places? The fact that Jesus was from Nazareth should lead us to believe that he's in those places, too. Come and see.

When Jesus encounters Nathanael in this narrative, Jesus affirms him by declaring that in Nathanel, despite his skepticism, there is no deceit. Nathanael was being upfront about his questions, his doubt even. And maybe only in expressing that doubt could he then affirm in front of Jesus: "Rabbi, you are the son of God! You are the king of Israel!"

His questioning, his doubt even, led him to greater belief.

And then Jesus goes on to tell Nathanael that he will see now see greater things—heaven opened and angels ascending and descending. Greater things were in store for him now. All this because he asked a question and eventually got his answer.

Can anything good come from Nazareth? "Come and see," said Philip. Nathanael asked his question, looked, and then saw Jesus. And his life changed.

Jesus, out of the town nobody expected him to come from, revealed himself to be the One Nathanael and the others had been promised. And their worlds changed.