**SERMON John 1:43-51**

Let’s begin in prayer:

Lord Jesus, When you lived and walked on earth you were able to reach the hearts of your hearers through your actions and through your words. Your truth, lived out, moved people deeply and prompted them to follow you and to live in your way. So, as we enter the story of Nathanael, his reservations, and we hear Philip’s invitation to “Come and See,” and your promise that “greater things have yet to come.” We pray that you will move us and prompt us to follow you and live in your way, today. **Amen.**

I want to begin by looking at how Jesus has already been identified in chapter 1 of the Gospel of John, where we find our passage today. Of course, Jesus has been identified as the Word (v.1), the living Word that became flesh (v.14). He is described as the true light (v.9) and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (v.29). He is called the Son of God twice (v.34 & 49), Rabbi twice (v.38 & 49); and, of course, Messiah (v. 41). And in the verses Pastor Lori just read, Philip referred to Jesus as “him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote” (v.45); and Son of Joseph of Nazareth. And finally, Nathanael calls Jesus - King of Israel (v.49); and Son of Man (v.51).

But why does John, so early in his account, give Jesus so many names? Well, one explanation may be that each disciple is bearing witness to Jesus in his own way. We know that human beings, though they may look at the same situation or read the same information, encounter the same person, will come away with completely different impressions. John is making sure, right at the outset of his account that whatever perspective or angle you are coming from, that you understand who this Jesus-guy is.

You see, at this early stage in the text Jesus has performed no miracle, shown no signs, and engaged in no teaching. Jesus has presented no proclamation about the reign of God that could excite the imagination of Philip or anyone else. Phillip has no evident reason to find Jesus to be remarkable. He is just Jesus from Nazareth, the son of Joseph. A fact, that if anything causes Nathanael to scoff, but the gospel writer is intentionally bearing witness to the complex, multilayered, genuine humanity of Jesus. A claim that John will continue to powerfully reinforce throughout his Gospel account. Insisting that Jesus is, in fact, a real flesh-and-blood person, who thirsts, gets hungry, grieves, and dies. But the witness doesn’t stop there. In our passage today, Jesus the son of Joseph is also hailed as the Son of God and the King of Israel. This is a testimony that Jesus is fully human AND fully divine.

Now, Maya Angelou once said that, “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you.” This is a sentiment that the writer of the Gospel seems to agree with. He is compelled to share with us the stories of those who have gone before, of those who have walked alongside Jesus, who have heard his words and experienced his presence. And in doing so the gospel writer is bearing witness to the life of Jesus and the effect his presence and his teaching had on those around him.

John is not doing this to simply be a great story-teller. He desperately wants to move us and draw us into the narrative, into the experiences of Philip and Nathanael. He says in chapter 20 verse 30 that the words he’s writing down “are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

It is my prayer for you today, that you feel what Nathanael felt, that you catch the excitement, the intensity and the gravity of what it might mean to awaken to something new, to a new thing that God is doing in our midst even during these unexpected and unusual times. Yet even as Philip follows Jesus and bears witness to Nathanael. Nathanael remains skeptical, questioning Philip’s judgement, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (v.45) But Philip was not interested in subjecting Nathanael to a long homily on messianic proofs. He makes the best possible invitation, both then and perhaps now, he says “Come and see” (v.39).

Bearing witness, at this time, to what God is doing doesn’t mean having all the answers, it doesn’t mean you have to be a theologian or an expert in the Bible. Instead, it more often than not, means taking a step back, taking a posture of humility, listening to others, and allowing the evidence of God’s work speak for itself. Because despite your reservations or skepticism, the fact that God brought Jesus out of a backwater little town means that God can still accomplish great things in unlikely places and in unlikely times. And that is good news for us today.

In this encounter with Jesus, something snapped into focus for Nathanael that is maybe not obvious to the hearer. You see, since we are not from this place or time in history, we are not fully clued into the prejudices of that day. Historical evidence can reveal that Nazareth was indeed a small, fairly insignificant village, but we are left in the dark when it comes to its reputation, and how it came to get it. But Nathanael’s amazement isn’t really about Nazareth. Nathanael’s reflex to question if anything good can come from Nazareth, actually says more about him.

That’s true for all of us whoever or whatever our Nazareth might be. That question says more about us than it does Nazareth. It is about our beliefs and unbeliefs in others, ourselves, and God. It’s about our biases, prejudices, and fears. It’s about our wounds, losses, and sorrows. It’s about our guilt and shame. It’s about the assumptions and judgments we make, and it’s about all the many filters through which we see the world, others, ourselves, and God.

We, of course, hold a multitude of these prejudices about certain people and places. And though they mostly go unspoken, they inevitably inform how we live, where we shop, where we bank, where we park our cars when we go into the city. Our prejudices though often implicit, are preferences and biases we’ve developed over time that, though subconscious, shape how we move and live in this world. And in our passage today, we get a glimpse of Nathanael’s implicit biases against Nazareth and its inhabitants. And it momentarily prevents him from accepting Philip’s witness, that he has found the one “about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote” (v.45). Nathanael expects his bias to be shared by Philip, and perhaps Philip used to think the very same, but something has changed for him already, and that opportunity for change, now has come for Nathanael.

This text, has fallen during the season of Epiphany, is itself an epiphany. And epiphanies tend to transform people, empower them and motivate them. Before this point, Nazareth is a blind spot for Nathanael, and for us. For God, however, Nazareth is a place of epiphany, a place where God shows God’s self and invites us to see, to believe, and to love in new ways. Don’t you see, our prejudices can prevent us from seeing the good that God has for us and for the world. And that’s a tragedy. But, perhaps more tragic is the impact our prejudice can have upon others.

Now, you may remember that tomorrow is MLK Day, in observation of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr the son and grandson of Southern Baptist ministers. Who attained a Bachelor of Divinity and a Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from Boston University. And yet because of the biases of a predominantly white society, and because of prejudice of others…not because of his hometown…but due to the color of his skin. Racial prejudice meant that he lived in constant danger. His home was dynamited, he was harassed by death threats and jailed about 30 times; but through it all he had come to believe something different about himself and his purpose. Like Nathanael, Dr. King experiences an epiphany-induced change that is often referred to as his ‘vision in the kitchen.’ He bears witness to that experience, saying in his own words:

*“I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. ‘I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.’ At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: “Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.” Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.”*

(Martin Luther King Jr, Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story, 1st edition (Harper & Brothers, 1958), 124–125.)

For Dr. King, the challenge wasn’t overcoming his own prejudices, but those of others, as he strived to realize the dream of having his four little children one day live in a nation where they would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. Nathanael’s epiphany, in which he suddenly could see clearly who Jesus was, challenged his own prejudice. The journey to interrogate and dig into our own prejudices is not an easy one and it is certainly one that takes a lifetime to really unravel. But it’s a journey that, if we are humble and willing, can open us up to experience God in new and transformative ways.

I am thankful for this short story about Nathanael today. I’m thankful that God worked in and through the lives of civil rights leaders, particularly Dr. King this weekend, and is still working in unexpected ways in unexpected places. I’m finding hope that God is bigger than my prejudices and gives me ample opportunities to grow in awareness of them, opportunities to confess and repent of them, and dismantle them so that they do not impede God’s work in others. I’m grateful that the Still-Speaking God is still in the business of epiphanies, of showing up in scripture, in friend and family member, in creation and in more places than I can name…inviting us to “Come and See.” But most of all, on the eve of MLK Day, I am praying that we may be ready to bear witness to the great things that God has done and is continuing to do today. I am leaning into Jesus’ promise to Nathanael that “greater things” are indeed, “yet to come.” (v.50)

**Amen.**