

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector  
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B  
January 14, 2024**

*John 1:43-51*

Where do you recognize God? Where is the holy presence active, palpable, known? This story from Samuel and all the Gospels of the season of Epiphany are about looking for the presence of the holy one coming into our midst. They are recognizing God becoming incarnate, taking on flesh and blood, in Jesus, in our lives.

The wise men following a star to meet Christ. The Holy Spirit descending on Jesus at his baptism by John in the River Jordan. Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding transforming the ordinary into the holy. Jesus's call of Nathanael and Philip to invite them to new life. God giving a vision to the boy Samuel in our Old Testament reading. The old, blind priest Eli becoming able to recognize God's presence. And what about me and you?

These epiphanies, manifestations of the presence of the holy, still occur- but we have to know how and where to recognize them when they appear. Even a broken and blind man like Eli can see them once in a while. If he can, so can we.

*This* Gospel story reveals another way God is manifest. Jesus went to the region of Galilee, in the north of Israel where he did much of his teaching. There he met a man named Philip and said, "Follow me." So direct, elegant, simple, to the point. It was an invitation to follow Jesus wherever he led to see how the Lord sees. Philip accepted the invitation. The next thing he did was find his friend, Nathanael, and tell him all about Jesus.

This Jesus, the carpenter's son from Nazareth, was the great teacher they had all been waiting for. We don't know much about Philip or Nathanael other than that they were friends. They were extremely ordinary. They, like we, have mixed motives and are always sinners and saints at the same time.

We know from this story that Nathanael was a skeptic. His response, after hearing all his friend told him about Jesus, was dismissive at best. He said, *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?* Nothing good ever happened there. You can insert your own *least favorite* place here... where Browns or Ravens or Bills are from, for example. Wherever the *last* place you would expect to find a miracle or hope is, that's what Nazareth symbolizes in this story.

Jesus ignored the derogatory comment about his hometown and praised Nathanael's integrity. He then joined his friend and became a follower of Jesus. They were both present with Jesus for the rest of his life and even witnessed the ascension.

Nathanael learned something good could come out of Nazareth. What he found there made sense of everything else. The town of Nazareth is a real place. But it is also a metaphor for good emerging from unexpected places or events. It is a symbol of resurrection... of new life where there was none. Can anything good come out of Nazareth for you? Come and see.

That was the epiphany revealed to Philip and Nathanael that day. The last place you expect to find a miracle is the most likely one where it will occur. The experience through which you meet death, is also where God likely will bring new life. That's how God usually works, at least in the Bible. The world teaches us that death always follows life. Jesus teaches us that new life always follows death. That's God's way.

In the midst of suffering or difficulty, and certainly in the face of death, it is almost impossible to recognize this. Our lives or relationships or jobs didn't turn out like we expected or hoped. Something doesn't go our way or we hear bad news upon bad. God is recreating through those ashes breathing new life into you. It is precisely there that the Lord is working.

About twenty years ago, one of my parishioners called to tell me she wouldn't be at church for a while. She had just moved into a new house for retirement. In her first week there, she had an accident in the unfamiliar place. She fell on the steps and broke her tailbone. It's extremely painful, and there's not much to do but rest and wait for it to heal.

She said that she learned from the experience that-- sometimes we just fall- or fall apart. People, families, churches, businesses, countries- we all do. We fall or have things crush us. It's not necessarily sin or evil that causes bad things to happen. It can be bad luck, an attack, an accident, or being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Entropy is a real thing. While it can be someone's fault or the fault of no one, we still have to deal with the consequences. And while it is painful, we can look for what God is doing, an epiphany, through that experience.

While it is often impossible to recognize God's grace in that moment, it is possible to discern over time. That's what the entire Bible is, in a sense,- a record of the many ways God creates and recreates- of new life always following death in God's Kingdom.

What is your Nazareth? What are those experiences that you thought nothing good could come out of, a time of pain or transition or death- that later were revealed to be a source of healing or gave hope or new life? Let me share one of my own.

As a child, my family moved often, every year or two. I was always the new kid with a different school and friends, trying to figure out the culture. I found stability in voracious reading and playing soccer. I played soccer year-round on traveling teams, indoor leagues, and for my school. Those were my constants, my touchpoints. Church wasn't really a part of that until later.

In high school, I had no idea about a career and was not sure about even going to college. Maybe the military or a trade. **One** summer working in a steel shop, moving blisteringly hot 60-foot steel beams, for \$4 an hour convinced me there were *many* worse alternatives than college.

I attended the college I did because they recruited me to play soccer. My heart and future were set. The Christmas break before graduation from high school, my traveling team played in an indoor tournament against older teams. In the first five minutes of the first game, I slid to block a shot and destroyed my right knee tearing the ligaments. That knee was never the same.

It dawned on me in the summer that I would never play again but went to that college anyway. That fall, a new world of learning and experience were open to me but I couldn't appreciate that fully yet thinking about what was lost. Over time, it dawned on me that I had found at least two hours a day free that were not there before. There was no practice or games. That allowed me to embrace what was around me and appreciate it in a new way.

Before long, I was taking numerous classes in science and religion and art and loved it all. Then I found the Episcopal Church thanks to a professor. The church, that was similar to Calvary, was a short walk from my college. Four years later, they sent me to seminary leading me to the most fulfilling vocation possible for me. At seminary, I met my wife that is the best thing that ever happened. Life in the Church led me several places and eventually to Calvary here with you in Pittsburgh. All along the way, I experienced fantastic things and met wonderful people along with all the normal ups and downs everyone faces.

None of that would have happened without that Nazareth event destroying my knee, ruining my expectations. At the time, it was devastating. Every time the weather changes, my knee aches. I am thankful because that reminds me of the event that led me to where I am today. Without that form of death, there was no possibility of new life but it took years to realize how many new doors and windows were opened to me and how many people crossed my new path.

In no way am I suggesting God causes bad things to occur. Sometimes we fall or things fall on us. Entropy is real. That's life. Nor is there a suggestion that God will magically fix it for you. That's not how God seems to work. Instead, the Lord enters into the world with us in flesh and blood, what we call the Incarnation. God illuminates a star to light our way leading us through the darkness. The Lord opens a door or window allowing us to walk or see through. People are brought together to be transformed. What we do with those opportunities, is up to us.

What is your experience of Nazareth, an event from which nothing good can seem to come...but creates the possibility of new life?