

Year B Proper 2 Be the Unexpected John 1 vv43 to 51

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael is highly skeptical when Philip approaches him with the exciting news that he has met the Messiah: the one about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote. This Messiah, he declares, is Jesus, son of Joseph of Nazareth.

Son of Joseph of Nazareth. This is the first time we’ve heard that title in a while. We’ve been hearing about the Son of God. Gabriel announced this to Mary. The angels proclaimed this to the shepherds. The wise men came from a distant land to kneel in worship at his side. At his baptism, the heavens were torn apart and a voice declared, “you are my Son.” John the Baptist has told us of his coming, expressed his own unworthiness to untie Jesus’ footwear. Jesus’ identity, Son of God, is being revealed to us through his revelation to others.

These revelations carry huge significance – they are a commentary on his identity. Mary is a nobody chosen to bear the Son of God. The shepherds, at the bottom of the social-economic hierarchy are the first to hear the amazing news of his birth. The wise men are non-Jewish worshippers, drawn to Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, from outside of Israel. John the Baptist is the prophet sent to proclaim Jesus’ impending arrival and ministry, and John is rejected and killed by the king – he is the last in a long line of prophets sent by God, who were tortured or killed because the leadership didn’t like what the prophet had to say about the uselessness and the brokenness of worldly power, which would be replaced by the healing wholeness, the unifying love and peace of God’s power. All of these revelations of who Jesus is come from very unlikely, highly unexpected sources – the ‘nobodies’ and the marginalized, the rejected and those who don’t even worship the same god.

But these are the ones who need God most, the ones who need the love and the welcome of a community founded on and living by the absolute justice and inclusiveness of the God whose law is love – love God, love planet, love each other. This feels unexpected – this steadfast love and care of the poor, the sick, the marginalized, the different – it feels unexpected because these are, often, the ones who are, for us, the most difficult to love. Love is most often for us, an emotional reaction to people, an attraction to people for various reasons and, it very frequently also requires respect and admiration. These things develop over time as we get to know people and, the reality is, we do not get to know the people on the margins, the down and out, the different from us.

We see that how and through whom God reveals himself tells us important things about God and, at the same time, causes us to do some self-reflection. Today we are given more of the unexpected to chew on – more that tells us about God and more for us to think about in terms of our reaction to the story.

Philip eagerly shares with his friend the news of the arrival of the Messiah and his friend, Nathanael, scoffs: This Messiah comes from Nazareth? Can anything good come out of Nazareth? The Messiah was expected. That this Messiah would be human – that, too, was expected. But, from Nazareth? Really? That was not expected. Nathanael, who was from Cana, apparently did not think very highly of the little backwater place called Nazareth in Galilee. The prophets did not say anything about the Messiah coming from Nazareth and, if the Messiah was going to be a powerful person who would liberate the Jewish people from their oppressors, then why would this person not be born in and live in the centre of Jewish power – Jerusalem?

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Nathanael has negative preconceived notions about Nazareth and dismisses Philip's news because of them. Can anything

good come out of the Church? Perhaps you have been frustrated, even hurt, by the unexplained wall that goes up when you mention church or God or religion. There are many people out there – non-churchgoers and former churchgoers – who have negative preconceived notions about the Church. There are plenty of reasons for this: a bad personal experience with someone in the church, negative news stories. Even if it's about another church – or an organization that shouldn't even be called a church, like The Church of Scientology – the bad press seems to be generalized to all churches, to religion in general. The Church has made some pretty serious blunders over the years but, many people simply let society tell them what to think about church and about God – that it's boring and unnecessary.

New Testament scholar, Stephen Huntgren explains, “What [people] have heard or seen about the church—from a distance—convinces them that the church is a bad thing. Sometimes these preconceptions are unfair. People prejudge the church without actually getting to know it. But the church must also ask itself whether it has failed to offer people reasons why they should “come and see.” Does the church thoughtfully offer people a coherent vision for life? Or does it offer a mixture of entertainment, pop psychology, and superficial spirituality that satisfies in the short term but leaves people empty, when the difficult questions and problems of life arise? If we are convinced that Christian faith holds the truth about human life, then we must, in all earnestness, show people how that truth makes sense and is embodied in our own lives, both as individuals and as communities” (workingpreacher.org).

Nathanael was confronted by the unexpected origin of the Messiah from a small, unimportant town far from the centre of worldly power. God's power is not at all the same as worldly, self-centred, must-accumulate-for-myself power. His pre-judgement

nearly convinced him to ignore the news. But, his friend said, “Come and see.” This, too, is unexpected. The Messiah is supposed to be impossible not to notice, impossible not to know with certainty, big, mighty, announced with trumpets...not announced in the simple invitation of a friend.

The Church, and we as individuals, often fall prey to the idea that when an almighty, all-powerful God works in our lives and in our world, it should be big and unmistakable – actions worthy of an almighty, all-powerful God. God, though, refuses to be labeled and put in a box. The God whose voice breaks the cedars of Lebanon, whose voice shakes the desert, and strips the forests bare, that God also chooses to be the still, small voice in the silence, a voice in the night sounding very much like the human lying in the room next door, the voice of a friend saying, “Come and see.” Not every encounter with God will be earth-moving and light-dazzling on the outside. But, that will be the effect on the inside – slowly but surely.

A young woman, with a lovely voice, very much enjoyed the attention she got when she sang in front of people. In her very small, out of the way town, that meant singing each Sunday morning in the church choir. The worship itself “was of no interest to her, and she would often secretly read a paperback novel in the choir loft, waiting her chance to perform. Then, somehow, the words of the solos and the anthems began to have a certain power for her. ‘Worthy is the lamb who was slain,’ and ‘I know my redeemer lives,’ began to speak to her beyond the concerns of musical phrasing and pitch. She was gradually acquiring not only an acquaintance with the vocabulary of the faith, but also a relationship to the One to whom those words point. Now, when she sings, she does so with a new name. She is no longer ‘performer.’ She is ‘witness’” (Tom Long, p.68 of *Shepherds and Bathrobes*).

Perhaps she is now witnessing to a man in the back pew who would rather be “sitting in the car in the church parking lot reading the sports page of the Sunday but his wife has insisted that he...accompany her...There also is the teenager in the balcony with one ear [tuned to the preacher] and the other focused on the whispers of her boyfriend [next to her]. There is the couple who have come because they were invited by the family across the street and they had no handy excuse not to say yes...The calling to follow Christ is a pathway which is marked ‘come and see.’ It is a pathway which is far more important because of where it leads than because of where it begins” (p.67, Long). It often begins unexpectedly: wandering into a strange church on a sudden whim, being dragged in by parents or a spouse.

There is a lady who faithfully attends the Collegiate Heights worship service with me every single Friday. She went down south to visit her son over Christmas and, on the first Friday back, she came to me after the service to talk to me. She told me that her son had done something very unexpected. “Get your coat on, mum,” he’d said to her. “I’m taking you to church.” She was shocked. This son had not set foot in a church in well over 20 years she said. He’d never taken her on any other visit. She got her coat on and they went. Her son even stayed to chat with the minister afterward. I said this was wonderful and I asked what she thought had been different this time. “Well,” she said. “I always tell him how much I enjoy your services.” She shares with him the gist of the sermons and the fun we have over coffee. The result was unexpected.

“No matter how we begin, we see as we travel that the pathway has been cleared for us by the Christ who goes before us, making of our many beginnings a common journey. ‘Come and see,’ we are told, though the voice which calls us sometimes seems faint, filtered through the voices of the ordinary folk around us. And, for whatever reason, we *do* go, and, then, we *do* see...No matter who we were when we

started, we are made a new creation, given a new identity in Christ as a child of God” (modified from p.68, Long).

Even as we make our journey into Christ, we are asked to be the voice for the unexpected beginning of the journey for others. Although it seems like Jesus is still only talking to Nathanael at the end of this story, the “you” he speaks is the plural “you” to everyone who hears his words. You will see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. That promised gift is for us to see and to share after the journey begins with a simple phrase: “Come and see.” The ‘come and see’ could be spoken but it *must* be lived. John reminds us that faith does not *need* to start with miraculous signs from God but, also, and often, will begin when people see us living out together the good news that the kingdom is in the process of fully arriving and, because of this, we have on offer a life of true joy and peace, and hope. “Come and see” got Nathanael moving and he *did* see – an unexpected Messiah from a small unimportant village whom he then suddenly and unexpectedly proclaims as “the Son of God.” The Holy Spirit takes our words and actions and uses them to do what we would be unable to do alone.

Tom Long shares the story of once staying in a motel in a large city where he was surprised to find, posted by the elevator door, a small, handwritten notice which read, “Party tonight, 8pm in Room 210. Everyone invited!” He wondered who would throw such a party and pictured a room filled by an unlikely assortment of people – sales reps seeking a little relief from the boredom of travelling alone; a vacationing couple tired of sightseeing; a few curious but cautious motel employees attending because of professional responsibility; maybe even some young people who snuck out of the parents’ room to check it out. The sign by the elevator soon came down, though, Long says. It was replaced by a sign explaining that the party invitation had

been a joke. In a way, he says, that was too bad. For a brief moment, those of us staying at the motel were tantalized by the possibility that there just might be a party going on somewhere to which we were all invited – a party where it didn't make much difference who we were when we walked in the door or what motivated us to come; a party we could come to out of boredom, loneliness, curiosity, responsibility, eagerness to be in fellowship, or simply out of a desire to come and see what was happening; a party where it didn't matter nearly as much what got us in the door, as what would happen to us after we arrived (modified, p.68-9, Long).

Maybe, if there is going to be such a party, the church is going to have to throw it. Let us be the unexpected beginning of a journey toward an unexpected Messiah. Let us be the invitation that proclaims to the world: Come and see. The unexpected *will* happen.