Sunday, January 19, 1997
CAN ANYTHING GOOD COME OUT OF LINCOLN?
John 1:43-51

There's one verse in the story just read from the Gospel according to John that jumped out at me this past week as I was reading the passage. Sometimes that happens when you study the Bible.

Here's the background. Jesus had begun to gather his closest disciples. Two brothers, Andrew and Peter, were among the first to decide to follow Jesus. Next, Jesus found Philip, who was from the same village as Andrew and Peter, and he became a disciple. Philip had a friend named Nathanael, and he told Nathanael, "We have found the Messiah, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth." Now, here's the verse that jumped out at me.

Nathanael's first reply to Philip was, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And Philip said, "Come and see."

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" I don't know if Nathanael had anything specific against Nazareth or any special reason to doubt the town. No one knows for sure the name of Nathanael's hometown, although some traditions claim it was the town named Cana. Maybe there was some sort of rivalry between it and Nazareth, like the one that exists from time to time between Lincoln and Omaha.

I've been in Nazareth several times within the past 20 years, and it's a lovely village nestled in a little pocket on the side of a hill, which commands an extensive and beautiful view. It wouldn't be bad for a child to grow up in such a place.

But certainly Nazareth had never been remarkable for anything in the way of religion or politics. As far as we know, it had never produced a well-known man or woman of God, or any notable political leader. It is never even mentioned in the Old Testament, which means that it hadn't any special religious or historical associations.

There weren't any heroic stories that could have been told about its past. It was a small country town. There's an old saying about such towns, "If God made the country and man made the town, the devil made the little country town." I certainly don't agree with that saying. Personally, I have always liked small towns, probably because I grew up near one and in one.

As far as I know, Nazareth was not any worse or any better than countless other small villages.

There's a larger principle at work here. We human beings frequently make judgments about people and places without any sound basis for those judgments. Nathanael, who had always thought of Nazareth as a rather dull and drab town, could not imagine anyone of any importance coming from there.

It sometimes seems to me, for example, that certain Eastern sports writers wonder how the University of Nebraska in Lincoln could produce a national championship football team. They wonder how anything good could come out of Lincoln. I'm sure some of the same judgments are made about Green Bay, Wisconsin, and the Green Bay Packers.

Sometimes the people in the towns themselves have that problem. That was true of at least some of the people in Nazareth. They didn't expect their town to produce anything very important. No doubt they were fond of their village, and they didn't like other people putting it down, but they felt it wouldn't ever amount to much in terms of heroism or religious leaders.

We know this because one day, when Jesus, in the course of his ministry, went back to Nazareth where he had been brought up, he didn't get much of a reception. They said, in effect, "He's one of us. He was raised in our town and used to be a carpenter. We've had him work for us, and we know his family, his brothers and sisters — they still live here, so he can't be anything special."

They didn't expect their town to produce any leaders of note. They had known too much about commonplace days and ordinary people. Nazareth wasn't the kind of place where heaven seemed near or where wonderful things were likely to happen.

How much of human nature there is in all of that. Nazareth is not the only place of which it has been said, "Can anything good come from here?" but it is a striking symbol, a classical example. It shows that many of our cynical comments and negative questions are wrong. It shows we can be limited by our expectations, that we can be blind to God at work in our midst.

For out of Nazareth, out of that little-known place, there came, by God's grace, the greatest good that has ever come among us: the love of God, focused uniquely in a human being.

In a humble home in Nazareth, unknown to the world, Jesus Christ grew up. There, he learned to walk and talk, to play with other children; there, he went to synagogue school; and in that town, he learned to be a carpenter. From there, at the age of thirty, he went forth to kindle in the world a flame that is still burning and will never die. This is what happened by the grace of God in the little town of Nazareth, of which once it was asked: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

As I said earlier, there's a larger issue at work here. We have to be careful of our quick negative judgments of people and places.

Bernard Shaw once said, "The only man who behaves sensibly is my tailor; he takes my measurements anew every time he sees me, while all the rest go on with the old measurements and expect me to fit them."

Since Nathanael couldn't remember anything good ever coming out of Nazareth in the past, he at first assumed that no good thing would come from there in the future. At first, he was unwilling to take a new measurement of Nazareth, but when Philip invited him to come and see, he changed his mind. The townspeople of Nazareth made a similar mistake. They measured Jesus by their previous association only and failed to take a new measurement of him as a teacher of God, although hopefully later some of them were willing to take a new measurement.

A few years ago, our local Lincoln newspaper carried a story about a young man who had been told that he was retarded at age 14. He was in prison and had been given an I.Q. test, on which the score was computed to be 69. "You are seriously retarded," he was told.

But this young man refused to believe it. He went to see about getting some education, but again was told that he wasn't too bright. Not to be put down, at age 15, he started in the third

grade. In weeks, he had finished the eighth grade, and then sometime later, high school. With scholarships from the State Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation, he finished four years of college with a degree in sociology.

He went on to graduate school and, after getting his degree, got a job with an agency that works with young people who have severe problems. Because of his own background, he has helped many young people change their ways, and they have gone on to make significant contributions to their communities.

Now let's talk more specifically about us. There probably have been people in your personal and professional life who formed a certain opinion of you, and even though you have grown, matured, and changed, their opinion of you has not. They failed to take a new measurement.

And each one of us has done the same thing. As parents, we know the difficulty of taking a new measurement of our children as they grow and mature. We can make the mistake of continuing to think of them as children who don't know very much, who can't make tough decisions, and who need our advice no matter how mature they are. The opposite is also true: children often fail to take a new measurement of their parents. They assume that older people do not change or grow.

The problem is present throughout our society — not only with people and events but also with ideologies and our Christian faith.

Last week, for example, John Smeltzer and I attended a minister's conference, and some of the main speakers there were associated with a new study group known as the "Jesus Seminar," a bit of a controversial group to some because of their research concerning the "historical Jesus." We learned that some ministers had refused to attend the conference because they were like Nathanael and said, "Can anything good come out of the Jesus Seminar?" and their conclusion was that it could not. Unfortunately, unlike Nathanael, they were not willing to come and see.

This story about Nathanael touches us all at a very personal level. Almost every one of us knows what it is to settle into a state of unexpectancy, a habit of not expecting very noble things of ourselves or others. Our life seems such a commonplace thing. The place where we live seems such an unhelpful or unexciting place. People even wonder whether or not anything good can come out of Lincoln. I remember when we moved here from New Jersey, some of our friends there wondered what kind of wilderness we would be living in, or, as one woman said to my wife, "But where will you shop?"

Some of you may have a vision of what a truly heroic Christian life would be — what it would be to live in this world as one of God's champions. But it seems very far from you and belongs to another time or another place, but certainly not here. You might have even come to believe that that kind of life belongs to people whose lot is cast more favorably than yours.

If only you could make a new start somewhere else, you might have a chance. But what chance have you here, where you are? Thus, you don't expect very much of yourself. You wonder, "Can any good thing come out of me? Or can any good thing come out of me while living in Lincoln?"

You don't expect very much of yourself. You hardly expect ever to be much of a Christian, to be a very good, pure, courageous, unselfish woman or man. You don't expect to be of much

use to God and others. You don't take very seriously, as applied to yourself, the offers and promises of the Gospel. How can all of this happen in your ordinary life? Can anything good come out of you and of Lincoln?

And the answer is: "Yes, it can." Out of Nazareth came Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And it has always been his way, and still is, to go here and there, to the most unlikely places, and seek out all sorts of women and men to offer them the opportunity to do great things for God. It might be Nazareth, Lincoln, Cozad, McCook, Red Cloud, Scottsbluff, Waverly, or Omaha.

The good news of the Christian faith is that God does not judge us by our past, or by what village, town, or city we have come from, or by what ethnic group we belong to. God takes new measurements all the time. When Jesus met people, he accepted them as human beings open to new possibilities.

Here are two questions for you to consider this coming week.

First, do you want to do something positive for God and for others? The two always go together. Doing something for God and others does not mean becoming famous or wealthy, or becoming a missionary in some far-off place, although you might want to do that, and that would be something very positive for God.

On the other hand, doing something positive for God and for others includes day-to-day things like being the best parents possible, being a responsible citizen, fulfilling your vocation in a dedicated way, treating the people you meet day by day with dignity and respect, volunteering to be a Sunday School teacher, or a Girl Scout or Boy Scout leader, or any one of a number of other ways you can contribute to the community in which you live.

The second question is another form of the first question: is there anyone here who does not want a place in God's great purpose? There isn't anyone who needs to be left out unless you want to leave yourself out. You will leave yourself out mostly by not believing you can do anything positive. Remember, God's grace can work in every kind of Nazareth, in every kind of life. Can any good thing come out of Lincoln, or Nazareth, or especially out of your life? Be like Nathanael and at least come and see. Amen.