Sunday, January 16, 2000
COME AND SEE
John 1:43-51

One of my favorite characters in all of the Bible stories surrounding the life of Jesus is Nathanael, who became one of the early disciples. He was not afraid to ask questions. He was not hesitant to investigate when invited to do so, and he was willing to re-examine and even change his basic assumptions when the evidence warranted it.

Here's what happened. Not long after Jesus started his public ministry, he began to gather his first disciples. Andrew and Peter, who were brothers, were the first to accept the invitation. Not long after, Jesus asked Philip to join the group. He was from the same village as Andrew and Peter. Philip had a friend named Nathanael, and he told him, "We have found the Messiah, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth."

Nathanael was skeptical. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" That was Nathanael's first question. Why should where a person comes from make any difference? I don't know for sure if Nathanael had anything against Nazareth, any special reason why he would have doubts about someone who grew up there. But something bothered him, or he would not have asked the question.

No one knows for sure the name of Nathanael's hometown, although some traditions claim it was the town of Cana. Maybe there was some sort of rivalry between it and Nazareth, something like that which has from time to time existed between Lincoln and Omaha.

I've been in Nazareth several times in 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 seems to me that it would be a nice place to live and a good place in which to raise a family.

Maybe Nathanael asked the question because Nazareth historically had never been remarkable for anything in the way of religion and politics. It had never produced a well-known woman or man of God or any notable political or religious leader in the same way that Bethlehem was known as the "City of David." Nazareth is never mentioned in the Old Testament at all, which means that it did not have 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 a built-in prejudice among many people about small country towns. One old saying goes this way: "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 appreciated small towns. I suppose that's because I grew up in and near one.

As far as I know, Nazareth in the time of Jesus was not any worse or any better than countless other small villages.

However, there's a larger principle at work here. Nathanael's question illustrates how we human beings frequently make judgments about people and places without any sound basis for those judgments. We make assumptions that may or may not be true, not only about cities or towns but about people, ideas, and beliefs, and those assumptions, unless we are willing to question them, can be a block to new knowledge. Thus Nathanael, who had always thought of

Nazareth as rather a dull and drab place, could not imagine anyone of any importance coming from there.

It happens all the time. We judge people and even institutions by their address — is it prestigious or not? Some years ago, our denomination, the United Church of Christ, decided it would be a good idea to move its national offices from New York City to somewhere else because of the high cost of rent and other services in Manhattan. I was a member of the national committee that was appointed to investigate and to make a recommendation as to whether to remain in New York or move, and then to suggest a new location if it was decided we should move. After visiting a number of cities across the country and trying to assess the cost of moving and the cost of renting space or purchasing an office building, our committee recommended St. Louis.

At a subsequent national meeting of the denomination, this recommendation was voted down in a rather close vote, our committee was dismissed, and a new one appointed. There was strong opposition from some people who believed we needed to remain in New York City because that's where all the action was. After several more years of study, the recommendation was that the national offices be moved to Cleveland, and that's finally what happened.

The discussion surrounding this issue was fascinating and revealing. At one point, the Executive Vice-President of our national Pension and Annuity Board said to me, "We cannot move out of New York City because Wall Street is here, and that's where all the action is as far as investments are concerned." I asked him if he had ever heard of Warren Buffet in Omaha? And then I reminded him that Mr. Buffet's investments are many times as large as our annuity funds, and he makes all of his decisions from his home base in Nebraska. In fact, Mr. Buffet had been quoted as saying he thought he could make better decisions by being at a distance from Wall Street rather than being caught up in the rumors and frenzy of that place.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Sometimes people who live in towns or cities ask that question of their own town. That was true of at least some of the people who lived in Nazareth. They didn't expect their town to produce anything or anyone very important. No doubt they were fond of their village, and they didn't take kindly to other people putting it down, but they felt it wouldn't ever amount to much in heroism or religious leadership.

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 this town and used to be a carpenter. We've had him do work for us. 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 people 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 in which 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 can be wrong. It demonstrates that we can be limited by our expectations, that we can be blind to God at work in our midst.

It's amazing! 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, there 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, and from there, he went forth at the age of thirty 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 it was once asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Note especially what happened next in this story. After Nathanael asked his question, Philip didn't argue with him. He didn't try to convince him with words. All he said to Nathanael was, "Come and see." And here's especially why Nathanael is one of my favorite people. He accepted Philip's invitation. He was willing to re-examine his basic assumption that nothing good could come out of Nazareth.

When I was growing up, maybe I was about nine or ten years old, I decided for some unknown reason that I didn't like chicken noodle soup. My mom, who was a very patient woman and who made good chicken noodle soup because she went to all the trouble of making her own noodles, never tried to force me to eat it, but kept encouraging me to try it. In effect, she kept quietly saying to me, "Come and see." For a long time, I was not willing to re-examine my basic assumption that I didn't like chicken noodle soup. One day I did try it, and it was delicious.

When I meet new people, I frequently ask them, "What is your religious background?" or "Do you presently attend a church on a regular basis?" Sometimes people will tell me about an unfortunate experience they've had with a church or religious group, how they've been hurt. I never try to convince them otherwise with words, but I invite them to try our church. "Come and see." It's all right to courteously issue an invitation. The person to whom the invitation is issued can then accept it or decline it.

Come and see. Unfortunately, unlike Nathanael, there are those who refuse to come and see, who refuse to consider new evidence on any matter, but want to stay where they are — believing that "nothing good can come out of Nazareth."

To use another metaphor, they are paid-up, card-carrying members of the Door-Slammers Organization. Such people cannot feel safe in an open-ended world, so they have to bustle about closing doors and locking windows in the human mind, setting burglar alarms and nailing "Beware of the dog" to the gate. I've met individuals who cannot have a sense of personal identity until they have made up their minds about everything. If you invite one of them to "come and see," they decline the invitation.

There was a French scientist who in 1887 said, "From now on there is no mystery about the universe." A truly cosmic door-slam. In 1895, Lord Kelvin stated, "Heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible." He got a standing ovation for this comforting assurance. About the same time, Professor Lippmann told one of his brightest students, "Physics is a subject that is exhausted, and you had better turn your attention to something else." The student's name was Heilbronner, who became a famous modern physicist.

There are a lot of door-slammers in religion. All the world knows of the pressure the church brought on Galileo to get him to recant his “false and heretical” opinion that the earth was not stationary and was not the center of the universe.

A few years ago, I attended a minister’s conference where some of the main lecturers were Biblical scholars who were associated with a group known as the “Jesus Seminar,” a somewhat controversial group to some because of their research concerning the historical Jesus. I discovered that some ministers had refused to attend the meeting because, like Nathanael, they asked, “Can anything good come out of the Jesus Seminar?” but unlike Nathanael, they were unwilling 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 down into a state of unexpectancy, a habit of not expecting very notable things of ourselves or others. Our lives can become dull because we refuse, when invited, to consider a new idea, or a new outlook, or to re-evaluate an opinion we have about someone. We are unwilling to “come and see.”

Some of you may even 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 and now. You might even have come to believe that such a life belongs to people whose lot is cast more favorably than yours.

There are even those who think that the only way a new start is possible is to move somewhere completely different. You tell yourself that you have no chance where you are. Thus you don’t expect very much of yourself. You wonder, “Can anything good come out of me?” Or can anything good come out of me living where I do?

The answer is, “Come and see.” If you accept the invitation to “come and see,” you will discover, as did Nathanael, that something good can come out of Nazareth, and something good can come out of you. Out of Nazareth came Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Out of some of the most unlikely places, people emerge to do great things for God and for all of us. It might be Nazareth, or Lincoln, or Omaha, or Waverly, or Red Cloud, or Wahoo.

The good news of the Christian faith is that God does not judge us by our past or what village, town, or city we come from, or what ethnic group. God has not so created us and the world that we are limited by our place of birth or where we grew up or where we live now. When Jesus met people, he accepted them as human beings open to new possibilities at any age and any place. The only limit is that which we place on ourselves.

Come and see. Come and see. Amen.