

Something you may want to get used to hearing me say is “I struggled with the sermon this week!”

Sometimes in our lectionary the readings are ambiguous or unclear and it is difficult to discern what God is asking me to highlight for God’s people. Other times (like this week) the lectionary is so rich that it is difficult to narrow down the focus...

For example, do I speak of the OT reading with the unlikely call to Samuel. Or is it the demise of the house of Eli? Or the psalm with the language of intimacy between God and God’s creation of humanity? Or the Gospel with the call of the first disciples and that great line of scripture “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

And of course, the lectionary, for me is overshadowed by my obsession with the news: news around the pandemic (and these new variant strains) and the vaccination; news coming out from American politics and my concern for friends and family; and of course, tomorrow marks MLK jr. day and his witness and strength to stand for what God was calling him to do feels more poignant this year than in recent memory.

So what do I preach on?

Finally, on Saturday night, at 9:30, I settled on the Gospel. It was where God was leading me. Here we go!

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The account of the calling of the first disciples in the Gospel of John is quite different from the other three gospels. In John’s Gospel, the first four disciples are Andrew and Peter, then Philip and Nathanael. In the verses preceding today’s passage, it is John the baptizer who introduces two of his disciples (Andrew and an unnamed disciple) to Jesus in Judea. After spending a day talking with Jesus, Andrew runs to share this experience with his brother Peter. The Interpreter’s Concise Commentary suggests the unnamed disciple is Philip, because of the story which follows (and is today’s reading). The setting for today’s incident is Galilee. Jesus finds Philip and asks him to “Come with me!” Philip, like Andrew, can’t keep the good news to himself, and runs to tell Nathanael. But Nathanael is skeptical. Could the one spoken of in the book of the law and foretold by the prophets

really be a carpenter's son from Nazareth? Philip doesn't argue with him. He simply responds, "Come and see" – the same words Jesus had offered to Andrew and Philip.

Nathanael is portrayed as a realistic person – devout, cautious, a bit stubborn, but also curious. Jesus comments that he has seen Nathanael sitting under the fig tree, a symbolic place of peace and meditation. Jesus promises that Nathanael will gain an understanding of God even greater than their ancestor Jacob experienced through his ladder dream, where God's messengers traveled back and forth between earth and heaven.

What struck me in this week's passage is the degree to which Nathaniel's first reaction to Jesus feels rather tinged by sarcasm. I say "feels" only because sarcasm seems more frequent in our media than in our Scriptures. We are used to talk radio hosts, media pundits, cultural commentators, or sports analysts employing sarcasm from time to time to make a point. But rarely do you hear something sarcastic in Scripture, and that caught my attention.

While I first found Nathaniel's reaction ("can anything good come from Nazareth?") – a little off-putting, I was soon grateful for it. Why? Precisely because sarcasm is so present in our culture and is increasingly directed to the church. While in former generations the church could expect fairly consistent support from the culture, those days are waning. (This isn't meant as nostalgia, by the way, but rather simply an attempt to be honest about our current situation.) And today we can expect a variety of reactions to what our faith communities offer. Interest? Sometimes. But also doubt, sarcasm, and indifference.

John's Gospel is characterized by a variety of encounters with Jesus, from characters that range from a devout if skeptical Jew like Nathaniel to the religious leader Nicodemus, to a "foreigner" like the woman at the well, to an outcast in the man who received his sight and so forth. Paying attention to this variety of responses to Jesus may help us to prepare to address the variety of responses we receive when we share the Gospel.

And this week, I'm struck not only by Nathaniel's sarcastic skepticism, but also by Jesus' incredibly *gracious response*. First, Jesus genuinely compliments Nathaniel, affirming the very quality – "without guile;" that is, someone who doesn't (or can't!) hide his feelings and so speaks his mind – that contributed to his smart-

aleck and sarcastic response in the first place. Then, he lets Nathaniel know that he *saw* him. (“Seeing” is more than mere physical sight, of course; it’s noting someone’s presence, valuing them enough to pay attention.) Finally, he makes Nathaniel a promise that he will see far greater things than what Jesus has just shown him.

Throughout, Jesus’ response to the varied reactions of these first disciples – and, indeed, throughout the Fourth Gospel – is what I would describe as “gracious invitation.” He does not get defensive, or irritable, or boastful, or demanding –but instead he focuses on his dialogue partners, taking them seriously, and inviting them through word and deed to “come and see.” Except when it comes to Jesus, it doesn’t stop with come and see, but always moves to the deeper invitation to come and *be*. *Be* what God has called you. *Be* the person the world needs. *Be* the beloved child of God who invites others to a similarly transformative experience of relationship with the Divine.

I read this week of a congregation whose mission statement is: “Believing, belonging, becoming.” In light of the Gospel today, I couldn’t help but wonder whether “belonging” should come first, as while in years past those looking for a church were most interested in what a congregation believed (denominational affiliation), in recent years folks seem most to want a community that simply accepts them as they are and invites them to belong. I think that one word - belong - stretches across our whole lives and very much characterizes what it means to be a Christian. One is never left alone, always being pulled to some more, something greater, something closer to God’s dreams for us.

The good news is that God is not done with us! That, indeed, God will never be done, never give up, keep showing us with grace and inviting us to become more even as God loves us just as we are.

Perhaps, our task this new year is to keep offering the “gracious invitation” of our God. Perhaps it will result in Nathaniel’s rather stunning reversal and confession. Perhaps it will take far longer, as it does with Nicodemus, who leaves his first encounter with Jesus utterly perplexed, only to show up again at his trial and after his crucifixion near the end of the story. Perhaps it will empower people to witness to their friends and neighbors what they have experienced, as it does with the woman at the well. Or perhaps it will give people the courage to face the adversity in their lives, as it does the man who receives his sight. We don’t know.

But we do know that Jesus keeps extending that invitation to our people – and to us! – to become the persons God has called us to be and the world needs. Even when we fall short. Even when we have a hard time believing. Even when we have a hard time getting ourselves to church...or our computers... Yet Jesus is still there, always inviting and loving and forgiving...and all out of the “grace upon grace” that he embodies, incarnates, and offers. Amen.