

Epiphany 2, Year B
John 1: 43-51
January 18, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

What Can Come of This:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Nazareth. Nothing good ever comes there.

A small town in the midst of Galilee. A backwater in a backwater.
A town not far from scenes of Roman cruelty and oppression. A town marked by violence and cowed by fear. Nazareth. A dark cloud hangs over it.

There's trouble there. Best to give wide berth to Nazarenes you might encounter on the road.

No wonder Nathanael shies away when Philip tells him about the man he's just met—the one Moses and the prophets talked about, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth. No wonder Nathanael asks incredulously, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Nazareth—the last place Nathanael would expect to find the one the prophets talked about—the messiah, the Holy One of God.

We all have Nazareth places and moments in our lives—times and places where we least expect to encounter God. Dark places. Places we want to avoid. Hard times. Times when we find ourselves saying, “Can anything good come out of this?” Times often given over to despair.

And yet when I remember the Nazareth times in my life, I'm struck by just what does come out of those times, by just who I do encounter there.

December, 1998, was one such time for me. The place—a hospital room in downtown St. Paul where my Dad lay tethered to tubes. My active, vibrant, vital Dad lay still. Barely able to talk and never above a whisper. Clearly he was dying. My mother numb. My brother and me arguing over what to do. An ugly, dreary scene. “Can anything good come out of this?” I likely asked myself. And yet. And yet what I remember most is not the dreariness of it all. Not the feeling of my world collapsing. Not that at all. What I remember most and feel in my bones even to this day is the deep peace that surrounded him and all of us that week. It was almost palpable. It seemed to change us all. That deep peace supporting us, sustaining us through that dark time.

The Great Depression was a Nazareth time for us as individuals and us as people. A time when, at it's depth, folks might well have asked, “Can anything good come out of this?” Our music director John Burke has an answer to that question. He tells the story of the rule his father laid down when times got really bad. The way John tells it, his father said, “Turn no one away.” Folks often came to their door for a hot meal or a piece of bread.

No one was turned away. What a lesson John's father taught his children. What a lesson John's father taught those who sat at that kitchen table—those others turned away. Enough for all. None turned away. What a lesson—for them and us as well.

Nathanael asks “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” In answer to his own question, he says convincingly, “The Son of God.”

And then he hears the promise—the promise Jesus makes. “You will see greater things than these.”

Think of the things Nathanael saw as he followed Jesus—the lame walking, the blind seeing, water turned to wine, dead brought to life.

“You will see greater things than these.” That's a promise Jesus makes to us as well. A promise we can trust when we begin to wonder, “Can anything good come out of this?”

You and I, we live in difficult times. All of us have been touched by them. All of us wonder “How will this affect us? What will happen to us?” “What does it mean when our state talks about paying people in IOU's?” “What does it mean when our country takes on another trillion dollar debt?” This is a Nazareth moment we are living in—a Nazareth moment in our lives as individuals and our lives as a country—a moment when we are prone to ask, “Can anything good come out of this?”

And yet remember what happened when Nathanael turned toward the Nazarene. He encountered God and received God's promise.

We can't avoid dark times. They are part of life. But God calls us to turn towards them in confidence and hope—confidence that God is with us in such times and hope that there we will receive God's promise and God's love for it is in the dark places of our lives that Christ's light shines most brightly.

Nazareth. Can anything good come of it? Of course, for God himself is there!