

Nicole Benevenia
Christ Church Exeter
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
January 14, 2024

John 1:43-51

Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"
Philip said to him, "Come and see."

I sat down at the end of the long table, with friends and strangers.
My boyfriend had gathered an eclectic group for dinner that night.
We were in New Haven, CT
On the campus of Yale Divinity School,
In an immaculately preserved old mansion
I'm pretty sure there were tall taper candles on the table.

Next to me sat a man a generation or two older.
He was wearing a flannel shirt and chacos,
Because he is a sandals in all-seasons-except-active-snow-kind of guy.
He had an open, simple manner about him.
he certainly stuck out from the setting and the rest of the party.
"Steve, this is Nicole," my boyfriend introduced us.
"Good to meet you." I said.
"So what's your story?"

And so as we ate dinner,
Steve Blackmer told me the story of his path,
What led him to divinity school.
It wasn't what I was expecting.
It involved growing up in the woods of New Hampshire,
An upbringing separate from any ideas of religion or faith,
Then a career in forestry and environmental advocacy,
Arriving at a turning point in his career and unsure where to turn,

He heard the bizarre, specific call
on an airplane.
“You are to be a priest.”
He had never been to church in his life,
And yet, he told me,
He was utterly convinced that God was calling.

Fast forward,
And Steve was now an Episcopal priest,
The founder of the Church of the Woods in Canterbury, NH.
He told me it was a church, but with no church building.
It was a Christian spiritual community,
but one that expected and frequently welcomed people
Outside of organized religious spaces.
It was a community that went way beyond
dedication to creation care –
a church that put human beings
back in the vulnerability and beauty of the created order,
not above or outside it.

At the time of our conversation,
My life experience consisted of
Being raised in NJ by indoorsy people,
And life in Boston and New York.
Steve’s story,
And his description of this community he founded,
Kind of puzzled me.
Hmmm. Okaaaay. I thought.

We all have our own “Nazareths,” don’t we?

It’s important to say that at this point of my life, I wasn’t naive.
I’d met God in a variety of different church contexts.
In my studies, I encountered the holy in literature and poetry.
I’d experienced Jesus in humble interactions
with the marginalized and powerless.
I wasn’t necessarily spiritually immature.
I don’t think that Nathanael was either.

Some scholars believe that Jesus mentioning Nathaniel being “under the fig tree”
Was a reference to careful study of Torah and other scriptures.
A hint that Nathanael as a Jew of faith and study and diligence,
A person waiting for the Messiah.
Maybe that’s why Philip runs to Nathanael so quickly after meeting Jesus:

He knew that Nathanael would want to know about this!
And yet Nathanael's reaction is,
"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"
Perhaps it's judgment, perhaps it's shock, perhaps it's a curious wonder.

We **all** have our ideas of the places, people, and corners of the world
Where we're confident we might experience God.
And then we **all** have the places, the people, the corners of our world
That are *just* far enough outside our experience,
Outside of our expectations.
Where we don't expect God to be.
Maybe it's a literal place, maybe it's in a stranger,
a person of a different gender or level of ability.
Maybe it's a whole political party.
When we are confronted by an experience of God
Outside those settings,
our reaction might be judgment or doubt,
Shock or curiosity.
Unfortunately and fortunately for us,
Jesus tends to show up on the edges of things,
On the margins,
In the outermost circle of the expected.
Jesus Christ shows up in Nazareth.

"Come and visit sometime!"
Steve said in his signature grounded-yet-sparkling manner.
I did not know it,
but it was an invitation to an encounter with God,
It was the beginning of an epiphany for me.
Can anything holy
come out of one hundred random acres
in a place called Canterbury, NH?
Come and see, my Philip said.

A month or two after that
I went to the Church of the Woods for the first time.
We made the three hour drive to the afternoon service
we were greeted only by a small, simple wooden shed
And a bundled-up Steve waving to us from the edge of the trail.
We hiked a quarter mile up
To where a few others stood waiting,
Gathered around a large,
slowly decaying tree stump.

There is nothing remarkable
about the 100 acres that Church of the Woods occupies.
It is forest and wetland,
with lots of gentle trails sloping up and down.
The property was clear cut about a century ago,
So this is an area of secondary growth,
Still growing back into maturity.
for the most part,
It looks like a lot of the New Hampshire I've come to know.

When the time came to begin,
We were warmly welcomed.
The service was simple,
And more familiar than I thought it would be.
We stood in a circle.
We listened to the readings.
We sang a simple hymn in call and response
With no music, just our timid voices reaching into the air.
The sounds of the wildlife around joined us accidentally.
But after the gospel was read,
Steve sent us out into the woods.
“Come back in 20 minutes.
See what calls to you in the forest,
and bring any small tokens back as an offering!”

I found a little corner to be alone.
I looked and listened.
I could almost smell the quiet.
Suddenly, I noticed things I had never,
ever noticed before in the woods.
New colors.
The way old autumn leaves layered on each other.
How many mosses and lichens I couldn't name.
I felt my heart opening and emotion choked my throat.

I picked up something small from the forest floor
and returned to the gathering.
Each person shared something about what they had just experienced.

As Steve led us through the words of the Eucharistic Prayer,
Using the huge old tree stump as an altar,
I saw the wood of the cross.
I saw my place in creation
In a brand new way.

Something opened up for me,
Something that let me understand that God was meeting me
In this specific moment,
in this specific and unexpected place.
Somehow, here, I felt known.
But how?
Where did you get to know *me*?
My heart asked.

A lot of environmental activism
focuses on changing behavior or changing systems.
And that's absolutely important!
But the work of Church of the Woods is *spiritual* work,
hoping to transform visitors from the inside out.
Through worship, through presence,
And sending them back out into the world again.
Like Philip and Nathanael,
like all of those first disciples,
They first encountered
And were encountered *by* Jesus.
Then, through those epiphanies,
They stepped out into the world
Where the spirit led them,
To hear a new call,
Or an old call in a fresh way.
To run to a friend or a stranger:
Come and see.

Getting to know Church of the Woods
birthed a new plane of Christian spirituality for me.
my appreciation of the Eucharist deepened.
My heart began to break over ecological devastation in a new way;
But most of all, this epiphany moment
Taught me how to notice.

What are your Nazareths?
Who has been Philip to your Nathanael?
How are you living out your own large and small epiphanies
In your own lives?
Thank God for our Philips,
and our Nazareths,
That constantly reveal Jesus to us in new ways,
over and over again.