

Invitation to Wonder  
First Reading: Isaiah 5:1-3  
Second Reading: John 1:43-51

Thank you for coming in this morning and having an interest in our work. Would you like us to get you a cup of coffee? No? Well, I've been trying to cut down on the caffeine myself. Have a seat.

My assistant tells me you would like to apply for our open position here. Do you have a resume you could share with me?

Hmmm. Seems a little light. This shouldn't take long. Says here you are from Nasalreh — (*Did I pronounce that right? Oh, Nazareth*). Is that a town or a county? Where is it? North of Samaria? Well, that's a bad neighborhood. I wouldn't want to get a flat tire there if you know what I mean.

Sooo, you're telling me Nazareth is a one stop sign village west of the Sea of Galilee. I had a cousin that rented a yacht up there one summer. Said it can get scary when the wind blows. Of course, my cousin thinks he can walk on water, so who knows? Anyway, I just Googled Nazareth and the latest census figures say the village has somewhere between two to four

hundred people. Bet the mailman gets done before his morning coffee break. Y'all just take turns being the sheriff?

Nazareth ... that could be a problem. See, the vast majority of our applicants hail from a different demographic — accomplished parents, educated in the best of schools, which to be honest, are primarily within a seven-iron of the Jerusalem temple. Three of our applicants have parents who served a term as high priest. Yet, under education, your resume says — some home school, mostly self-taught, did an internship with a carpenter, and as a twelve-year-old entered a debate contest with a group of adult rabbis. That was a bold move, but unfortunately, Jesus, as our ad clearly states, the minimum (MINIMUM) standards for the position of Messiah include — advanced degrees from an Ivy League institution, or as we call it, an Olive Leaf college; you would also need to have multiple articles published in accredited academic journals; you would need to have at least ten years experience as a high priest or head-of-staff.

So, Jesus, you just don't possess the heft of a resume that would be taken seriously by the Messiah Nominating Committee. Have you thought about fishing? There must be a market for fishing guides up there in Galilee.

Anyway, thanks for dropping by, and take my advice, when you head out for home, I'd recommend taking the outer loop around Samaria. No one should travel alone through there.

*“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?’”*

Jesus did not fit the profile of who Israel expected the Messiah to be. Have you ever felt sized up, but under appreciated? Perhaps you have perceived how instantaneously assumptions are made. As a native of small towns with names like Mexico and Louisiana way out in the flyover territory of Missouri, assumptions are a given. When I am meeting someone and they ask my hometown, my response typically elicits from them a look somewhere between confusion and pity.

I once had an accomplished, educated adult ask the follow-up question, “So, where is Missouri in relation to the Mississippi River.” It doesn't offend me. It's just funny, because, I admit, I lived in a town with 4,000 people, and we'd make fun of the kids from Eolia, population 500. Eolia — great name. It was named after the Greek god Aeolus, the ruler of

winds, because the day the surveyor plotted the land in 1881 it was incredibly breezy, which is not surprising. When the wind was whipping around during that storm here earlier this week, I may have mentioned to someone in the church office — You know what you call a day like this where I come from? Tuesday. Of course, if you want to get something to eat in Eolia, MO, you're going to have to drive 16 miles to Louisiana where you can get a plate-sized tenderloin sandwich at Fat Boys Diner.

Nazareth ... Probably didn't even show up on Tripadvisor. Nathanael was from Galilee, and even he could not imagine Nazareth would produce someone worth following. Philip telling Nathanael to drop everything and follow Jesus of Nazareth would be like me telling you to drop everything and follow Herb from accounting. As Isaiah foretold, "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." This Jesus was not going to meet our expectations, and this Jesus was never meant to meet our expectations. This Jesus was not yearning to impress. This Jesus had come to redeem.

In John's telling, when Jesus returned to his home territory of Galilee following his baptism by John, he found Philip. Before this encounter,

Philip, like Nathaniel, would have no reason to believe that any transformative figure would emerge from the backwater village of Nazareth, but an encounter with the divine changes you, obliterates your preconceived notions about what is important, what is possible, who you are, what is the meaning of your life, and what you are meant to pursue. Philip didn't need Jesus to give him a prospectus or a resume or a swag bag or a free steak and a sales pitch. Philip simply encountered Jesus and he was changed.

Sometimes you just know ... you just know. Do you remember the love at first sight vignette from *When Harry Met Sally*? All the guy did was walk across the room at the camp social and say, "I'm Ben Small, of the Coney Island Smalls." And his wife of 50 years remembers, "At that moment I knew. I knew the way you know about a good melon." Sometimes, you have an encounter and you know your life will never be the same. Jesus found Philip, said, "Follow me," and Philip followed. At this point of the narrative Jesus has not demonstrated any signs, offered no teaching, revealed any descriptions of the kingdom of God, or performed any miracles. Philip simply encounters the presence of Jesus and knows. This is it!

And what do we do when we encounter something that impresses us, that we love, that moves us, that “twangs our buds?” What happens? We cannot wait to tell someone. It doesn’t matter if it is the crab hush puppies at Pinky’s, or the best-selling novel, or the comedy of Nate Bargatze, or the view from the top of Hawk’s Bill; if whatever it is hits you right, you cannot wait to share it with someone. Philip encounters Jesus and cannot wait to tell Nathanael.

We assume Philip already knew Nathanael, but it could be that he was so excited, Philip pulled aside the first person he came across. You’ve got to see this! Have you ever done that? You see some phenomenon, say, the look of the sky from a particular angle at dusk, and you’re telling the stranger walking by to look up. *Did you see that?* Or maybe you are munching on some biscuit sample at Costco, and you are telling the first stranger you see, *“Don’t leave without trying this!”* Something has such an impact that you must share it. You cannot control whether they will like it or not, but you have to offer the invitation.

*“Nathanael said to [Philip], ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’”* Philip cannot hope to convey the

explosion of wonder he experienced in his encounter with Jesus. Words alone won't do justice to what happened. Just a couple of days ago, I tried to describe a board game we played as a family over Christmas. I had forgotten the name and most of the rules, but I remembered enjoying it, which is saying something. Understand, I'm not big on board games. Perhaps you saw the meme of the introverts New Year's Eve party. It was a photo of people sitting on a couch, silently reading their own books.

Board games reveal our vulnerabilities, idiosyncrasies ... which to me spells torture. Yet, overcome with the spirit of Christmas, I played, and don't tell Donna, but I enjoyed it. So, I was trying to tell someone about the game — “Well, you have this wheel revealing a spectrum, say from spicy to not spicy, and you want your partner to guess the answer by giving them these words ... No, that's not it ... The answer is identified somewhere on this wheel, and ... No, that's not it either.” At this point I could tell the eyes of the person I was describing this to were glazing over. I couldn't do it justice. I knew I enjoyed it, but I fumbled my attempt to describe what *it* was.

*(Wavelength)*

*“Nathanael said to [Philip], ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’”* Philip couldn’t describe what could only be experienced, but he could offer the invitation. *“Come and see.”* That’s an important word for the church today.

When the church raises the topic of sharing your faith, Presbyterians freeze. *Uh, you mean share something from the interior of my life, reveal how God is moving within me? Can’t I just deliver a casserole, hand out a bulletin, review a financial statement?* It’s not that God is not moving within you, granting you encounters within the presence of the Lord, enlarging your heart, opening your eyes to see the world in a new way. You may experience that, you may feel all of that, but you know your words are not adequate to convey that experience, articulate that encounter with the Holy. I know my words are not adequate, and look at what I was called to do as a vocation. It is not easy to describe what is so alien to others. But we’re not charged to replicate or dramatize the encounter with the Holy. We are charged to offer the invitation.

We live in a cynical world. We live in a *Can-anything-good-come-out-of-Nazareth* world. We don’t convert people to faith. We don’t control the



encounter with the Holy One. What we do is offer the invitation. *Come and see*. Many of you are here because someone invited you. They didn't convert you. They didn't give you an encounter with the Holy. They offered you the invitation — *Come and see*. If you came and hung around, it is probably because in some way — sometimes profound, sometimes subtle — you encountered the presence of the Lord in this community. Philip didn't open Nathanael's eyes, invade Nathanael's heart. Only God can do that. Yet, Philip played a key role. He offered the invitation. It was the presence of the Lord, the encounter with the holy, that moved Nathanael's heart. As with Philip, our call is to offer the invitation — *Come and see*. An invitation brought you here. The work of God's Spirit sustains and transforms you here. When have you paid the invitation forward?

You know, when churches are searching for pastors and staff members, they'll typically list in their expectations something like, "We hope our new pastor, educator, communications director, choirmaster will attract more young people..." Really? I ask. So ... who are you inviting? Because that is the only way it will happen. It's not going to be a marketing plan or snazzy brochure that brings young people, old people, new people to a church, and God knows, nobody wants to see a billboard with my face on it

out on I-485 or in a commercial — *We've saved a place for you.* It's not polish and shine that fills the parking lot. It's your invitation.

Occasionally, someone will say something like — *You know, I wish our church was more diverse. We need more diversity to be representative of God's kingdom* — to which I say — *I wholeheartedly agree ... Who are you inviting?*

The church doesn't ask you to convert anyone. We should have the humility to know that's above our pay grade. Transformation is through the power of God alone. No, what the Lord asks of us is to offer the invitation and in our admittedly flawed ways, to offer an introduction. *"Nathanael said to [Philip], 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'"* We live in a cynical world. What we are to be about is offering an invitation to the alternative, and trusting God to do what God does. You stick around here because you have come to know something good does indeed come out of Nazareth. It is something worth sharing. You won't convert your neighbor, but you can offer the invitation. Come and see. Amen.