

Sermon: Everywhere We Are
Rev. Char Corbett, Associate Pastor
First Church In Windsor
Sunday, January 15, 2012
Year B, 2nd Sunday of Epiphany

Please join with me in the Spirit of Prayer:

God grant us presence, pure hearts and loving purpose in all we say and hear,
knowing you speak to us in all ways. Amen.

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A few weeks ago, a friend sent me a link through email to a Bible geocoding website<sup>1</sup>. What is that, you might ask? Well, I didn't know either, but after clicking on the link, I discovered a whole new way of exploring the biblical places of the Bible. In technical terms, this Biblical geocoding website is a huge geographical data source that allows you to overlay Biblical places onto current day Google Maps using a real time application known as Google Earth. To put it simply, it's like biblical time travel through your computer. You can find Biblical towns and cities by Bible book, chapter or verse on a current day map! It's a fascinating tool and a wonderful way to virtually travel to Biblical places!

With a fun computer app like that and a text like the one we have today from the gospel of John, which names such places as Bethsaida and Nazareth, I confess I've spent hours virtually traveling the roads of Galilee this week. From the comforts of my home, I've been enticed to "come and see." And by clicking here and there, I've seen ancient buildings and modern day homes that have been built in those biblical cities; I've mapped out how many miles it would be to walk from Bethsaida to Nazareth to Cana; and I've seen pictures of plants

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.openbible.info/geo/>

and fig trees that are along the roadways today, perhaps similar to the one Jesus had noticed Nathaniel sitting under.

Additionally, my armchair travels have led me to consider Philip's and Nathaniel's pilgrimages with Jesus in new ways that can be related to the faith journeys that all of us have been called to.

First Philip. In this first chapter of the Gospel of John, Philip is the third person to whom Jesus has extended his grace-filled invitation, "follow me." By this time in our text, Andrew and Simon Peter have already been following Jesus. John the Baptist candidly pointed Jesus out and said to them, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" and away they went! But Jesus found Philip and he simply said to him, "Follow me." In the NRSV Bible, Jesus says, "come and see." Either way, it is a simple but life altering proposal. "Follow me. Come and see. Share the rest of your journey with me." Miraculously, Philip does. We learn in later passages that Philip is known as the more cautionary disciple. But trusting his heart and throwing caution to the wind this one time, he joins Andrew and Peter, two others from Bethsaida. Together with Jesus they start out for Galilee.

But what's the first thing that Philip does shortly after encountering Jesus? He finds Nathanael, his friend from Cana. And Philip enthusiastically shares the good news with him. "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth." He's telling his friend, "Hey, look! We found Jesus, the One that all the prophets and scriptures talk about!"

But more importantly, have you noticed the pattern of invitation to this pilgrimage?

John the Baptist shared the good news with Andrew and Peter and then Jesus said to them come and follow me. Jesus found Philip and extended the same invitation to him and he's soon walking and talking with his neighbors. Now Philip hardly hesitates before he tells the good news to Nathanael. Each one of Jesus' disciples is individually called but they also share with others!

How does that relate to our faith journeys today? Well, it's pretty clear that as much as our faith journeys are about our own life experiences and our personal call to follow God, they are also about being in companionship and extending an invitation to others as we journey forward in faith. Our calls to walk with Jesus are meaningless if we don't extend an invitation for others to also "come and see." We extend this invitation by how we live our lives and by telling family and friends, even strangers we have a chance conversation with about our faith and our faith community.

It's like the Amish Friendship sour dough bread<sup>2</sup>. When you share the starter with someone, they can make their own sour dough and then they can share with someone else and on and on it goes.

Philip's call reminds us that as we journey with God we are called to share our faith.

The second discovery I've made about this text as a result of my biblical geocoding has to do with Nathanael's call. I warn you, it breaks from what is traditionally said about this disciple who hails from Cana. And perhaps it is a stretch, but it's worth taking a closer look because I think it may remind us just how close Jesus really is to all of us.

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<sup>2</sup> Just have to offer this recipe: <http://baking.about.com/od/yeastbreads/r/friendshipbread.htm>

Tradition suggests that Nathanael is skeptical at first about this good news that Philip shares with him. The first thing he says upon hearing about this Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth is, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” The Nathanael we’ve come to know initially reveals himself to be haughty and narrow. “‘Are you kidding me, Philip? Nazareth? That hole of a place?! Can any good come out of it?’ He scoffs, despising a neighboring little town.”<sup>3</sup> Sticking with this traditional interpretation then, we can then say that thankfully, Philip doesn’t give into the temptation to argue with Nathanael. He faithfully continues with his ministry of invitation by responding as Jesus had said to him, and to Andrew and Peter before him: “Come and see.”

But what if Nathanael’s first question is not one of pure skepticism, but instead one of sheer surprise?

That was certainly my reaction when I typed in the request to map the distance between Nazareth, the town Jesus came from and Cana, Nathanael’s home town. The geocoding website revealed that Nazareth is only 4.5 miles southwest of Cana! The ancient road is nearly a straight line and hardly an afternoon’s walk.

Could it be that Nathanael was shocked to discover that Jesus had been that close to him all that time? What? Jesus has been this close, all this time? As close as Nazareth? No way!

Can you recall the first time you realized that God was as close to you as your faith community? Your neighbor? The stranger you sat next to? As close to you as your own beating heart? Do you still get that jolt of surprise when you remember God’s close presence once again?

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<sup>3</sup> The Interpreter’s Bible, Volume VIII, (Abingdon Cokesbury Press, NY, NY, 1952), p 488.

And what if Philip's invitation to "come and see" isn't just one of certitude, but of pure, incredulous joy, more like "I know, right?! Nathanael, he's been here all along! Come and see!"

Jim Wallis, creator and editor of Sojourner's magazine says, "In Jesus, God hits the street." And when Nathanael does follow Nathanael and meets Jesus for that first time on the road to Galilee, Jesus seems to already know him. Nathanael asks with wonder, "Where did you get to know me?" And Jesus' answer is stunning: "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael can hardly believe it. Jesus has been even closer to him still – not just 4.5 miles down the road all this time, but in fact close enough to see him under a fig tree! "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

And Jesus' response is also one of joy and love. He essentially says – what, spotting you under that common fig tree? That's nothing! Very truly I tell you, I'm so close that heaven is open and near to you and everyone else who dares to look! I'm everywhere Nathanael, and you'll never have to sit alone under that fig tree again. Come and See." Nathanael discovers Jesus in unexpected and very near places. Wherever we are, Jesus is there.

*[Psalm 139]:*

*"O LORD, you have searched me and known me.  
You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my  
thoughts from far away.  
You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with  
all my ways.  
Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.  
You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot  
attain it."*

It is a blessing to be invited into such an amazing pilgrimage, to be accompanied by divine wisdom and energy and love wherever we are for the rest of our lives.

I love it that we have the opportunity to explore this text too as we remember Martin Luther King Jr. this weekend. He too was once a newcomer to the circle of call and discipleship and like Nathanael, he had this experience in Jesus of God come near. He too was invited to walk the streets, sharing a vision where the reign of God was near and King gave his life inviting others to “come and see.” From Montgomery, Alabama, to Washington D.C. to the Birmingham jail to Memphis, Tennessee, King shared the dream that all people would someday be sisters and brothers in a world governed with love and peace. King has helped generations of people to remember that wherever we are and whoever we are, walking with God means working together in our communities for justice and equality. In this broken world, we too have the opportunity to invite others to come and see God’s Shalom of unconditional love gaining a foothold here already. We are called to share our faith but we are also called to live it. And even more surprising is that it is our choice to do so.

There’s a wonderful story told by a Jesuit priest, Anthony de Mello. He tells us that:

There once was a holy man, a sannyasi, who had reached the outskirts of a village and settled down under a tree for the night when a villager came running up to him and said, “The stone! The stone! Give me the precious stone!” “What stone?” asked the sannyasi. “Last night the Lord Shiva appeared to me in a dream,” said the villager, “and told me that if I went to the outskirts of the village at dusk, I should find a holy man who would give me a precious stone that would make me rich forever.” The sannyasi rummaged in his bag and pulled out a stone. “He probably meant this one,” he said, as he handed the stone over to the villager. “I

found it on a forest path some days ago. You can certainly have it.” The man looked at the stone in wonder. It was a diamond. Perhaps the largest diamond in the world. It was as large as a man’s head. He took the diamond and walked away. But all night long he tossed about on his bed, unable to sleep. The next morning, at the crack of dawn, he went back to the tree, woke the holy man and said, “Please give me the wealth that made it possible for you to give this diamond away so easily.”

As James Murray once said, “The only Bible that millions of people read today is our daily example.” The lessons we glean from the story of an Indian Holy Man, the intentional life of Martin Luther King, Jr., the biblical calls of Philip and Nathanael and the prayerful poems of the psalmist remind us that when we seek God, we will never journey alone. “Come and See.” It’s a simple invitation that takes us to unexpected places, one where we discover that everywhere we are, God is there, too.