

**ANYTHING GOOD**  
*Sermon for Epiphany 2B-Jn 1:43-51*  
LPC, 1/14/18

Just after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, restrictions were very tight about bringing anything on board an airplane that might be considered a weapon. Among the prohibited items were knitting needles. Among the knitting community, of which I am a proud member, this was a hardship, since knitting is a productive and soothing way to pass the long hours of a trip by airplane. Swiftly a joke arose among knitters that the reason you couldn't bring knitting needles aboard an airplane was because TSA was afraid you would knit an Afghan.

The humor of this joke, such as it is, depends on the double meaning of word "Afghan." In the knitting context, an Afghan is of course a knitted lap robe. In the context of airline restrictions an Afghan is a person from a country that was suspected of connections with terrorist groups.

Now, we all know that being an Afghan does not mean you are necessarily a terrorist, but in the early 20-aughts the connection was often drawn. The assumption that Afghans are terrorists is an example of prejudice: a conclusion drawn about something on the basis of a single known fact.

Prejudice, defined as concluding something about something on the basis of a single known fact is not always evil. It can in fact save your life. For example, you are out hiking and you see some fresh, large, animal tracks. On the basis of the evidence of there being a large animal in your vicinity, you may, on the basis of that one fact, turn around and quietly leave the woods. In so doing, you might miss the opportunity to meet a friendly Irish wolfhound, but you also might miss the opportunity to be torn apart by a rabid wolf.

So prejudices can be helpful, especially if you have to make a potentially life-saving decision in a very short period of time, or they may be unhelpful, if they make you avoid an experience that may be good for you. It's hard to know sometimes which it's going to be.

For centuries, tomatoes were considered to be poisonous. Why? Because they were known to be related to nightshade, a deadly poison. When you think about it, this prejudice is entirely logical. Nightshade is poison. Tomatoes are nightshade. Therefore Tomatoes are poison. A conclusion is reached on the basis of a single known fact.

Eventually some brave soul considered the possibility that other facts were involved, like tomatoes are a *different* kind of nightshade. And the opportunity opened up for the enjoyment of a nutritious, delicious, versatile ingredient. With the result that we now have pizza, without which the world would be a dismal place.

Today in the Gospel of John we have an example of Nathanael making an initial assumption about Jesus based on knowing one fact about him. This is a very common kind of prejudice among human beings: drawing a conclusion about someone based on where he came from. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nathanael says.

Now, we don't know why Nathanael has a problem with Nazarenes. Maybe a Nazarene actually did his family dirt at some point. Maybe Nathanael just grew up in a home where people said things like "Well, what do you expect from Nazareth?" without thinking. Whatever. Nathanael makes an assumption about Jesus based on Jesus' home town, and verbally blows him off. If this were the end of it Nathanael would have blown his chance to hang out with the Son of God. That would have been quite a loss, don't you think? Worse than no pizza.

But, to his credit, Nathanael responds to his friend's invitation to go and see ... and has his proverbial socks blown off by Jesus' apparent ability to see around corners. Jesus' response to Nathanael's instant conversion is interesting, because it seems as if Jesus can tell Nathanael is in danger of replacing one single-fact assumption with another. Jesus seems to be saying, "Don't believe on the basis of a parlor trick. Believe because you have let God into your heart."

We can read this story of Nathanael's call and conversion for its moral message: for clues as to how we should behave if we, like Nathanael, want to follow Jesus. We can draw some conclusions about being careful with our prejudices and open to the manifestation of God coming from unlikely places. But this story not only instructs us how to be disciples, it also tells us something fundamental about God.

This theological point, like the moral message, grows out of Nathanael's thoughtless comment, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" I'd like us to relate this, if we can, to situations where we ourselves say, "Can anything good come out of this?"

I have quite a few friends who are saying things like this about our current political situation: "Can anything good come out of this?" Can anything good come out of Washington DC? Can anything good come out of a situation where nobody respects elected leaders anymore? You can finish that question in your own mind. There is probably something in your experience whose outcome you can't see completely, and insofar as you can see, it don't look good.

This hopeless or dismissive attitude seems to be rather widespread. My perception is anecdotal and may be personal and skewed, but I don't think so or I wouldn't be preaching this.

What I want to say today is that to follow Jesus means never to give up on the idea that God can bring good out of anything. Whenever there is something about which we are tempted to say, "What good can come of this?" we need to remember that the God in whom we say we believe is in the redemption business.

The Bible shows this again and again. Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery. Can anything good come of that? Yes. The Bible tells us that Joseph would rise to a position of authority in Egypt and through his foresight save thousands from famine. Can anything good come of the Hebrews being enslaved in Egypt? Yes. God will call them out of slavery and make them a people and a light to the nations.

I invite you to imagine what it must have been like on Golgotha when Jesus was crucified. Those who loved Jesus must have felt like nothing good could ever come from that ugly scene. And yet it did. God is in the redemption business. We may not see how good can possibly come. But for God nothing is impossible.