

More than Just a Simple Sign
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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John 1: 43-51
1/14/2018

Should you ever travel east from the Carolina piedmont toward the coastal plains, and all the way down to the Atlantic Ocean, and should you decide to take the backroads along the way, you'll encounter a lot of places you may have never heard of. And I suppose some of these would be places you'd ask, "What good ever came out of here?"

Take 74-East down to Wrightsville Beach, and the people of Marshville, NC will be sure to remind you that this is the home of Randy Travis. Venture off Alternate Route 17-South on your way to Myrtle Beach, and the little hamlet of Spring Gully, SC will remind you that it's the birthplace of Chubby Checker. And take Highway 70-East on your way to Carolina Beach, and you'll learn that Smithfield, NC is where Ava Gardner got her start. There are dozens of other examples throughout our region. Light, and talent, and brightness, and goodness, and life-transforming people and things are not confined to the big city, nor only to the popular places. They are all around us.

Now I love our region, I love our city, I love our state. And so I pat myself on the back for knowing these little trivia tidbits – I suppose they help me display my civic pride. But here's the real truth: I've never been to the Ava Gardner Museum, and if I've done more than drive through Marshville or Spring Gully, it's only been to stop and get gas, or make a fast-food run. And I don't even own any Charles Kuralt books, so if he ever wrote about these places, I haven't taken the time to read what he had to say.

Let me put it this way – I acknowledge that these towns, and others like them, are very fine places, who have produced remarkable people and things. But that's where it ends. I have not taken the initiative to experience these places, nor the people that fill them for myself.

Here's what I think is remarkable about today's lection. The people of this text do more than listen. And they do more than store useless knowledge. The people of this text seek truth. And when they find it, they tell others in unique, creative, and authentic ways.

John the Baptist might as well have been a walking billboard for Jesus of Nazareth. I'm not trying to reduce him to a "World's Largest Ball of Twine This Exit" kind of sign or anything like that. But much like the highway signs of today, John's voice grabs our attention, and it says, "Hey, there's something really worthwhile to check out."

But some people don't just hear John's voice, or file it away as some piece of obscure knowledge they can use at next week's trivia night. Some people exhibit a curiosity, and a longing, and even a calling to explore what John has to say.

John points over at Jesus, and says to a couple of his disciples, "This guy right there is the Son of God. This guy's gonna change the world."

Andrew, and an unnamed disciple hear John, see Jesus, and follow him. They tell Peter and he does the same. And before you know it, Jesus has several new students, all eager to see where he's going next.

The following day Jesus heads to the Galilee, and there he finds Philip. And Philip tells his friend Nathanael about Jesus:

“We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

Now Nathanael is a righteous man, and a sincere one, too. And I think he’s eager for this news to be true. But like anyone would be, he’s a little surprised by just who this man is and where he’s from.

“Wait a minute,” Nathanael says. “You mean to tell me the Messiah is from a town that doesn’t even have a stoplight, and to my knowledge, anything of significance? Tell me friend, what good has ever come out of Nazareth?”

And this is the part I love. Philip doesn’t argue. Philip doesn’t pull out the 2018 Greater Nazareth Convention and Visitors Bureau Guide. He doesn’t tell Nathanael that Nazareth is actually the sixth largest producer of white fish in the region, the home to a dozen corporate headquarters, and that it has an average daily temperature of 67 degrees. So moderate! He just says, “Come and see for yourself!”

And right then, and right there, Nathanael’s got a choice to make. He can enjoy the fruits of his skepticism – he can enjoy the emptiness and nothingness of believing that some people and some places and some things lack unimagined possibilities and potential. And he can live in a world where the only thing that’s possible is the predictable. Or, or, he can go and see for himself. He can see that something wonderful lies beyond his skepticism. How lucky for each of us, that Nathanael chooses the latter of his two options.

Don’t ask me how, because I can’t explain it. But somehow, as Nathanael makes his way to come and see this special One, Jesus is able to perceive a good man – a man who eagerly and earnestly wants to know more. And somehow, someway, Nathanael is able to perceive that he stands in the presence of something divine. And both Jesus and Nathanael are not afraid to acknowledge what they see in one another. And in that mutual acknowledgement of one another, God’s family grows a little bigger.

Our lectionary has shortchanged you a bit this month – today’s passage is only a snapshot of all the activity that has occurred in the first chapter of John, and it’s but a foretaste of all that will follow. But already, John, and Andrew, and an unnamed disciple, and Peter, and Philip, and now Nathanael, have all experienced the Word made flesh – God manifested in Jesus.

But what’s interesting is that each man comes to Jesus in different ways. Some meet him for themselves; some hear of him from others; and in that hearing seek Jesus for themselves; and in their experiencing Jesus, they too, tell others. Gail O’Day notes that in just that first chapter alone, Jesus is expressed as many different things: Messiah, Son of Man, Lamb of God, the prophet foretold by Moses, the Son of Joseph of Nazareth, Rabbi, and the King of Israel. And in the chapters to come, Jesus will be described in even more ways.

This isn’t just a trivia fact. It’s an acknowledgement that Jesus is received in many different ways, and that his reception is a wholly personal thing. When we meet Jesus, we begin to see the possibilities that God has for this world. And as we express those possibilities in our own personal ways, we transition from receivers of the news to tellers of the news. And the transformative experience of God in Jesus is passed along to the next person to experience in the next conversation or encounter.

Today's lection also reminds us that the revelation of God in the world is not limited to time, or space, or place, or person, or any other criteria. The most recent news cycle says otherwise. It reveals that there are still those who believe a person's documentation, or a nation's prosperity are the markers of their value and potential.

So when a little tiny church in Charlotte full of people who have seen God working through all kinds of people in all kinds of places decides to tell the real narrative of God, the one that John and Philip knew, we had better be prepared to hear Nathanael's response: "What good can come out of those people and those places?"

Don't get mad. Don't get defensive. Be firm, but hospitable, and say, "Come and see for yourself."

Because I don't know about you, but I have met Jesus in the singing of *Halle, Halle, Halle*; and in dialogue that is slow, and sometimes painful, but always transformative; and at a table; and in service to others; and in advocating for social change; and in empowering our young women and young men with words about an accepting and affirming Creator; and in being around community that believes that simple acts of love have an extraordinary impact.

After all, remember, the lection ends with Jesus saying there are greater things to come.

And it makes me wonder about our sign out front: Sardis Baptist Church, a spiritually progressive community of faith. May it be so. Right now. And may it be felt. Right now. Amen.