

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

Rev. John F. Koerner

John 1:43-51

Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." (John 1:46 N.R.S.V.)

Come and See

I was reading about a town in northern Nigeria that just celebrated the renaming of their town. Apparently the old name for their town translated as, "Area of Idiots." I think we can understand why they would want to rename their town. No doubt the residents found it embarrassing to say that they were from the area of Idiots. The new name of the town translates as, "Area of Plenty." Which, I am sure you will agree, is a great improvement. The original name of the town apparently came from the river that runs through it. Yes, that right, the Idiotic River. It is not clear why the river bears that name.

The article I was reading went on to name several towns right here in the United States with unfortunate names. Would you like to live in Nothing, Arizona? Or Nowhere, Colorado? Or Hell for Certain, Kentucky? How about Satan's Kingdom, Massachusetts? Or Boogertown, North Carolina? Or Knockemstiff, Ohio? That last one apparently refers to the effects of the local moonshine - Knockemstiff.

Then there is also Slapout, Oklahoma. The name comes from the local store always having a low inventory - of them being "slap out" of whatever the customers wanted. (Dynamic Preaching, January 17, 2021, pg 15)

In our text for today we encounter another town with an unfortunate reputation. There is nothing wrong with the name of the town of Nazareth. But the town did not enjoy a good reputation. When Philip tells Nathanael about Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanael says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Apparently that was a common saying in those days. The town had a questionable reputation.

Perhaps the reputation was well deserved. When Jesus comes back to Nazareth after starting his public ministry, he is not well-received. In fact they get so angry that the crowd carries him out of the local synagogue to the top of a cliff. They are so angry they threaten to throw him off the cliff. That is pretty extreme. I have heard of churches getting angry at their preacher before. But I don't know of any that literally threw their pastor off a cliff.

Please church, don't get any ideas here. That hasn't happened that I know of, and it didn't happen there. Jesus passed through the crowd and went his way.

Still, there must have been some good things about the town of Nazareth. After all Mary and Joseph chose to live there and to raise Jesus there.

However, I want you to notice that Philip does not argue the town's reputation with Nathaniel. He simply says, "Come and See." That, "come and see," is an echo of what Jesus first said to two would be disciples in the verses just before our text. Those two had heard John the Baptist declare that Jesus was the Lamb of God. So they wanted to know more, they came to Jesus and asked where he was staying. He said to them, "Come and see."

I got to thinking about that phrase, "Come and see." Most of us, before we make an important decision, want to check things out for ourselves. As the old saying has it, "Seeing is believing,"

Who buys a new house without looking at it first? If you are in the market for a new house and a real estate agent tells you he has just the house for you, chances are the first thing you want to do is look at the house for yourself. Verbal descriptions are helpful. Pictures can be helpful. But most of us want to go walk through the house, see it for our self, get a feel for the place. So that is usually part of any sales pitch. This is the house for you. Come and see.

The same is true for buying a new car. I have heard of people buying a car online, but I can't see myself doing that. I would want to go see the car, kick the tires, - I'm not really sure why you have to kick the tires, but it is just one of those things we do. I would want to take the car for a drive, try it out, see for myself. Come and see.

There is a kind of tension in scripture that somehow faith should be believing without seeing. You remember how the disciple Thomas was not present when Jesus first appeared to the disciples in the upper room after his resurrection. So Thomas refused to believe until he had seen the risen Lord for himself. So Jesus does appear to the disciples again and this time Thomas is present. Thomas immediately expresses his belief. Jesus says to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (John 20:29)

While that might be the ideal for Jesus, the believing without seeing, Jesus does appear to Thomas and even invites him to come and place his hands on his wounds. Jesus acknowledges that for most of us. Seeing is believing. "Come and see."

God seems to have come to the same conclusion in sending Jesus to live among us. People had the law and the prophets, but somehow that was not enough. Human beings had a need to see God. So God took on human flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and walked among us. Jesus invited his disciples to "Come and See." They were invited to come see God and what God was up to in the world. They were invited to walk and talk and live with Jesus so that they might see and experience God. So they came to believe.

Jesus not only invited the disciples to come and see, he also invited them to “follow me.” That is an invitation that Jesus still extends to us.

“If we use John’s gospel as a source, Jesus invites us:
 to see where he lives.
 to observe the signs and wonders he performs.
 to stay and pray.
 to be filled with the Holy Spirit.
 to feed the flock (a life of service).” (Homiletics Magazine, January 17, 2021)

So as we are first invited to come and see, so are we also called to invite others to come and see. There is here a plan laid out for evangelism, for sharing the good news of the gospel.

Whenever we try to tell others about Jesus we almost always get resistance. It may not be “Can anything good come out of Nazareth.” But the answer is still the same. “Come and see.” People will not see Jesus in the flesh as he was in gospel times, but we still experience him in worship. Jesus has promised that where two or three are gathered in his name. He will be in the midst of us.

If people say, “How can there be a loving God when there is so much evil in the world,” we don’t want to start a debate with them. We simply say, “Come and see.” Come worship with me and experience God’s presence for yourself.

If people say, “I would like to believe but the Bible is hard to understand and contradicts itself too much.” We don’t need to be Bible experts and debate verse by verse. All we need say is come to church with me. Come and see. See for yourself. See and experience God for yourself.

If people say, “If there is a God, he is off somewhere high up and far away. He doesn’t care about people like me.” There is no need for long explanation and the quoting of many Bible verses. The answer is still the same. Come and see. See what it is like to be loved unconditionally.

It is tempting during this pandemic to believe that we can’t invite people to come to church with us, particularly if we our needing to stay home ourselves. But we can still invite people to join us on the live-stream or in listening to the radio. In fact, many new comers might find that easier to do that coming into the building for the first time. Yes, we are having in-person worship for those who want to come so that is still a possibility for some.

Listen, we are living in troubled times when people are hurting and afraid. Now more than ever, people need the Lord. You can help. It isn’t difficult. Use these three words. “Come and see.”

Amen.