

January 14, 2018
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John 1:43-51; I Samuel 3:1-10

Partly Cloudy

Do you know Debbie Downer? Have you ever heard people referred to as a Debbie Downer? She may have a Biblical brother: Negative Nathanael. We meet Nathanael in today's gospel reading, he's introduced after a cascade of other names: there's Jesus (of course), Philip, Andrew, Peter, Moses, even Joseph—after Christmas we rarely hear about Joseph, but he gets mentioned in today's gospel, Joseph from Nazareth who was the father of Jesus. But for all of these names concentrated right at the beginning, the bulk of today's gospel story revolves around one person, named Nathanael—and how negative he is.

Nathanael comes on the scene because one of the other people named: Philip, who has news to share, wonderful news. Philip is so excited to about this news he has to find someone to tell it to. And the person he finds is Nathanael—which may be a bummer, because Nathanael is such a downer. But maybe Philip thinks to himself, “Of all the people I could tell, Nathanael is one who needs to hear this good news” Philip eagerly finds Nathanael and tells him, “The one we've been looking for, longing for, the one whom the law and prophets have foretold, is here: it's Jesus, of Nazareth.” And Nathanael says, “Ugh, Nazareth? That's where he's from? That backwater? Can anything good come from there?” Not the most optimistic angle to take on the announcement of the Messiah.

And then the Messiah himself, Jesus, appears and speaks to Nathanael, and Nathanael has yet another thing to say in response. From the what Jesus says as Nathanael approaches you get the sense Jesus has overheard, somehow knows, what Nathanael said about Jesus' hometown. You have to wonder if Jesus had a smile playing around the corner of his lips when he says of the approaching Nathanael, “Here's a guy who won't mince words. Here's a guy who's nobody's fool, who's the opposite of gullible, who will question everything.” And Nathanael says, “How can you say that? How do you know that? How do you know me?”

Nathanael has a predisposition toward suspicion and a bent toward the bleak. Nathanael is fond of that familiar saying: that with every silver lining there is a cloud in front of it. In front of every silver lining there is cloud looming, in the foreground, that sliver of an outline only emphasizes the cloud's darkness and enormity, so says Negative Nathanael.

Maybe Nathanael was a great, great grandson of Oppositional Eli. Eli is one of the names that appears in today's Old Testament reading. In that story, Eli was just trying to get some sleep, and this child, Samuel, who was sleeping in another room, kept coming into Eli's room and waking him up. Eli says, “Why are you here?” Samuel says, “You were calling me!” Eli becomes oppositional: “No I wasn't! Go back to bed!”

Such naysayers, these two, Eli and Nathanael, which is why you could give them those adjectival titles, because of what they say—at first. But of course, that's not all they say. Both Eli and Nathanael have more to say, and the more they both say is the opposite of oppositional, is not at all negative. Eli, as you heard, twice tells Samuel to go back to bed, but when Samuel comes a third time, Eli realizes what's happening. Eli knows that he himself is not calling Samuel, but Eli is not opposed to who is. Eli perceives it is God who is calling Samuel, and, even more perceptively, Eli knows what to do, what to say, how to be receptive. Eli gives what is probably the best advice young Samuel ever got, that when you hear God call you say, “Speak, Lord for your servant is listening.”

And Nathanael is no downer; in the end all Nathanael can do is look up, and up, and up. All Nathanael's questions get answered, even the rhetorical one: Yes, something good can come out of Nazareth. "And yes," Jesus says, "I know you, Nathanael; I've always known you. I know you completely." Jesus says to Nathanael, "I saw you; I found you, even before Philip did. I knew, even before Philip did, that you needed good news." Jesus is that good news, which Nathanael now sees. Seeing Jesus, Nathanael makes an incredible pivot. What he says next does not fit his nickname at all. Nathanael's next line is an incredibly positive pronouncement: "Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" "Just wait," Jesus says to him, "you'll see even more. You'll see the heavens opened. You'll see all clouds swept away, so that all you can see is what's behind it all, in all its glistening, silvery glory."

Those nicknames that I suggested for Nathanael and Eli may be half-way humorous. They may be alliterative, but they're not accurate. They're reductive. They fail to acknowledge all a person is, what more they can say, what more they can be. How reductive, to refer to a person by a catchphrase. Maybe it starts out as joke, or masks itself as one, but so quickly it can morph into something worse: into a curse. Not just a nasty ways of saying things, but an outright slur. How diminishing, to speak that way of another human being, how diminishing—including to the person saying it. Our language becomes vulgar, and so do we.

Tomorrow we celebrate the birthday of someone who called our country to be free of this, to be free of the many ways we are enslaved by bigotry, prejudice, discrimination, inhumanity. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was called many disparaging names, as for centuries have people who have skin of various shades, Americans of African descent, who were brought to this land in chains. Slavery: our country's original sin. For twelve generations we lived it, and it lives on. Dr. King did not shrink from naming cruelty and brutality, of which he himself was also a recipient, but he did not respond in kind. King did not respond to those who opposed him with name-calling, but the very opposite: Dr. King preached the power of non-violence, the powerful force of selfless, self-sacrificing, Christ-like love.

The Bible tells us that in the cross, Christ became a curse for us. Christ became a curse, in solidarity with all who are accursed. And Christ became a curse to free us all from the curses we make, the curses we call down on others—and ourselves. As King declared, the diminishment of the oppressed diminishes the oppressor. None will be free, until all are free.

As in the days of Samuel and Eli, perhaps also now, in these days, the word of the Lord is rare. Perhaps the forecast is all clouds; and we cannot see how even a sliver of light can break through. Perhaps, like Eli, our eyesight has begun to grow dim—but we too can perceive that God is calling. God is calling, again, and again, and again. The lamp of God has not gone out. Visions may not be widespread, but we still have a dream, King's dream, God's dream, of black hands joining white hands, of working together, praying together, struggling together, that all may be free.

Think of all those names at the beginning of the gospel reading. Think of Samuel. Think of how God calls us, each of us, by name.

Speak Lord, we are listening.