

“Can Anything Good Come Out of This?”
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church—Toano, Virginia
2nd Sunday after Epiphany (B)—January 18, 2009
John 1:43-51

When I lived in North Carolina, I taught a Sunday school class of about 9-10 four and five year olds. I quickly learned to expect that I never really knew what to expect when we came together every Sunday. One particular Sunday, after Epiphany, our class got into a fascinating discussion about what *really* happened at Christmas because some of them felt that they had been tricked during the church’s annual Christmas pageant.

The seeds for this little debate had already been planted during Advent as we learned to practice the art of waiting. And as you know, it’s no easy feat no matter how old or young you are. The first two weeks went fairly well as I can remember. But by the third week, they were getting impatient. They wanted to celebrate. They wanted to light all the candles around the wreath, and all this waiting and wondering and watching was getting old really fast.

I was away traveling around Christmas time, so when I returned after Epiphany I asked them what it felt like to celebrate and experience the great gift that they’d been waiting for all that time. The answers made me laugh...but they also humbled me.

One young boy—a wise guy in his own right—looked at me, rolled his eyes, and said, “*Ms. Maria, come on, it’s Jesus. Don’t you know that we already know that?*”

Another kid chimed in and said, “*In church, they wrapped the baby Jesus in a t-shirt. They tried to pretend it was a blanket, but it was a just an old t-shirt.*”

Trying to salvage what was left of my question, I said, “*Well, wasn’t it exciting though? To finally see baby Jesus after all that time?*”

My little wise-guy looked at me as though I wasn't in on the story, and said, "*No! He was a doll and one of his eyes had fallen out. And now all that's left is to wait for him to grow up and die so we can have Easter.*"

Now we have to wait for him to grow up and die.

I was speechless. I began to think that maybe my little friend was on to something. He recognized that being a Christian is not always fun or cute. Later that day as I went home and thought about our lesson and the feelings of my class, I realized that they could have just as easily been spoken by any well-meaning and well-versed adult with different words but the same sentiment. If we are honest with ourselves, how many times have we approached the well-known stories of Jesus' birth, his childhood, and his journey toward Jerusalem with a sort of resignation to having heard the story before? Often, by the time Christmas is over we are plumb exhausted from all the festivities and preparation that this season of Epiphany just seems to roll right by us. We muster just enough strength to prepare for Lent and look longingly for Easter, the next great celebration. But in the meantime we somehow resume a posture of indifference, of getting through the day, of just trying to get by.

But does it really have to be this way? What my little friend and I failed to realize that Sunday morning was that while following Jesus isn't predictable or always glamorous, that doesn't mean we should stop looking and listening for God's love and goodness. The tragedy of our weariness is that we forget that God can speak and show up in the midst of the darkness, in the midst of the seemingly mundane and routine.

No seems to know this better than the writer of John's Gospel, which we heard proclaimed moments. The first half of John is known as the book of sign because it is there that John tells of a Jesus who reveals glimpses of his self and his glory in unexpected ways—such as

turning water into wine. Each sign drew the disciples closer to the reality of Jesus' existence as God in human form—as God with us. But you can imagine that for the disciples, who still had no knowledge of who Jesus really was just yet, how exciting and frightening that was. Nathanael, especially, knew all about this.

Nathanael had been sitting under a fig tree, studying and minding his own business when his friend Philip came by and declared that he had met Jesus, the one they had been waiting for. Many scholars have claimed that the fig tree is symbolic of Nathanael's devotion as an Israelite. So here he was, following all the prescriptions and Philip shakes everything he knows to the core and says: *“Guess what? We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth!”*

Nazareth? Jesus, the one whom the world had been waiting for, in whom **ALL** their hopes have been placed is from Nazareth? Being from Nazareth is the equivalent of being from “the wrong side of the tracks.” Besides, Nazareth was somewhat of a geographical and culture rival to Nathanael's hometown of Cana. *(It's like telling a Duke basketball fan that there is goodness to be found in Chapel Hill. It's just not supposed to happen.)* Fittingly, Nathanael says, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Nathanael was dumbfounded. *Can anything good come out of this?* Fast forward 2,000 years and you'll see we probably ask ourselves the same question from time to time? *Can any good come out of this?* Last week, we learned that the unemployment rate is the highest it has been in a generation. And it's only supposed to get worse. Our brief respite from high gas prices is slowly ending. And though we speak of a timetable for withdrawing from Iraq soon, the reality is that the effects on our soldiers, our economy, and the people of Iraq won't end so quickly. And in case you forgot, W-2s are going out soon, which means its time to pay taxes again. Except

some folks are still paying from last year. To top it off, we're in the midst of an especially cold winter that started earlier than we remember it starting last year. And that's what's on the news. What about the struggles in our hearts that threaten to overwhelm us. Dare I be so bold—or so foolish—as to ask, *can any good come out of this?*

Yes. I have to ask. And so do you. And we ask not because we have some blind optimism that the economy will miraculously turn around in two weeks or the latest book told us to think happy thoughts. We ask because when we ask we ask not as Nathanael, who didn't know how the story would end, but as people of the resurrection. We know how the story will end. We ask because we are a people who come to this altar week after week, on our knees, with our arms outstretched, our hearts full, and we partake of a great feast of love that tells us we are a people whose meaning and worth are found in being part of the God's redemption of the world. We come with our hopes and dreams, our fears and our worries and we receive the life that reminds us who we really are—children of God whose life can't be bought and determined by the account ledgers, but through a ragged piece of wood in which life was redeemed, in which we were united back to God, in which God claimed us as God's own from the things in our lives that threaten to define us, destroy us, and reduce us to our weaknesses and our past. Friends, we know not what tomorrow brings, but we know that God is with us. And though we ask this question not like Nathanael we must go forward and follow as Nathanael did 'cause deep down we're all a little like Nathanael under the fig tree at times.

Yep. My Sunday school a few years ago seemed to have hit the nail on the head. No, Jesus didn't come like they expected. We had spent weeks preparing during Advent. Then Christmas came and the baby they saw in church was a doll with one eye and he had to “grow up

to die.” It was a disappointment. It was boring. It seemed like they had just sat back and watched everything go down the drain. The next big celebration wasn’t until Easter, they thought.

What I wish I told them, what we often need to remind ourselves, is that we can participate in the story, too. Faith isn’t always watching and waiting, although it often feels that way. But faith is being a part of something. It’s living amidst the arresting drama of God redeeming the world and finding ways to experience that in our lives.

We’re all waiting for things to get better, and this season of Epiphany reminds us that Jesus—the one we’ve been waiting for—is here, shining a light in our darkness. Dare we step out in faith and follow and see? Dare we tell our past and the weight of all that drags us down that it has no more power? Dare we allow ourselves to be confronted by the One who created these very bodies—the one who the Psalmist says knows us better than ourselves?

Yes, we could sit under the fig tree like Nathanael or my precious kiddos and wait for Jesus to grow up and die and doubt any good can come. That would be easy. Instead, we can come out, follow Jesus and find out what it really means to love and be loved as though nothing else matters. Because in the end—nothing else does. For if we open our hearts and minds we just may see the angels descending and ascending on the Son of Man—the One from Nazareth. But please. Don’t just take my word for it. Go. See for yourself.