

**2 Epiphany B January 14, 2018**

## **Godforsaken**

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It is a word that seems to have gone out of fashion, at least I haven't heard it in a long time, and maybe that's a good thing. Because it is a word that denotes a tremendous emptiness, a miserable condition, where there is no compassion, no connection to any one or anything, a desolation worse than being forgotten. The word I am speaking of is the word "godforsaken"; and when it is used it is most often used to describe a place. There are several factors that could cause a person to judge a place godforsaken. Often size is a factor, and the godforsaken is hardly ever large and bustling, it is almost always small. Small and out off the beaten path. Another characteristic is that the place is usually isolated, cut off from the rest of the civilized world, making it a lonely place. It has no booming economy, and no hopeful prospects. It is often lacking in luster or beautiful architecture or places of recreation.

On a theological note, to say a place is godforsaken is to utter a curse against it, for it indicates a belief God has not only forgotten that place, but has forsaken it, given up on it, that God has no hope left for the place or the people in it. God has left, and isn't coming back, leaving a devastating absence in place of God's Presence. Calling any place godforsaken is a serious claim, as it is a judgement deeming a place and its people unworthy of God.

Yet it is a word to keep in mind this morning because of the question a man named Nathanael asked about Jesus in John's Gospel. This morning we are in the Gospel According to John, and it is very different from the other Gospels. It was written after Matthew, Mark and Luke, and some scholars claim it wasn't written by one person as much as it was compiled by a community. Whether it is the product of one person or several, the Gospel of John is filled with signs, words and illustrations that suggest Old Testament stories, and fascinating characters. Some believe there is a code to John's Gospel, and while the Gospel itself is still with us, the codebook, or system of interpreting the signs or Old Testament connections has been lost to the ancient past. Which means the Gospel of John can be a bit confusing or difficult to understand. It can also mean it is terribly easy to get lost down rabbit holes trying to figure out the original hidden meaning in a word, character, or event.

Despite not knowing all its secrets, I believe there is a great deal of relevant storytelling in John's Gospel that shows or manifests to us what the author or authors believed and understood about Jesus of Nazareth, and today's section of John's Gospel is a prime example.

At first it seems today's section from John's Gospel is about the disciples who chose to follow Jesus, as they believed him to be the Messiah, and we can see in the dialogue that they appear very enthusiastic about this belief. Philip was so enthusiastic he found Nathanael, someone we know very little about, but appears to be someone Philip knew, or at least wanted to talk to. And after Philip told Nathanael what he believed about Jesus, Nathanael asked a question that I believe is worth paying attention to and is at the heart of this periscope, because it may be one of those questions that says a lot about who is asking the question and who Jesus is at the same time.

The question Nathanael asked is: *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?* Personally, this question sounds a bit cynical to me. Other commentators or preachers say they hear sarcasm, humor, or doubt. But I hear something more sinister, I hear a harsh judgment against a man because of where he is from.

You and I may not have any reason to have negative feelings about Nazareth of Galilee, the little village we know Mary, Jesus' mother is from. To our minds it might sound like any small town in any region in any place in the world: quaint, charming, where everyone knows everyone else, where neighbors help neighbors endure the hard times and celebrate the good ones. It might be like any unremarkable village, and history certainly would agree, as Nazareth doesn't show up in history books very often. There seems to be more written about it as an archeological find than a place where historical events happened. In other words, Nazareth wasn't an important town in Biblical times, it was just a small unremarkable village.

But to me, Nathanael's question seems to indicate a meaner spirited prejudice than a simple, small village deserves. Remember, his question was: *can anything good come out of Nazareth?*, and there needs to be some attention paid to the word good in this question. According to the *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, theologically, the word "good" means more than just excellence of quality or moral qualities; it denotes that goodness itself is God, and therefore all assessments of what is good, or not, is based on God. So, if we look at Nathanael's question with that understanding of the word "good", it might

sound like he is implying nothing good can come from Nazareth because God is not there. Perhaps, in a way, Nathanael was calling Nazareth “godforsaken”.

As I mentioned before, one of the characteristics given to godforsaken places is their size; they are usually small, but size alone hardly qualifies a place as godforsaken. So, what could have been Nathanael’s problem with Nazareth? Were they rivals at high school basketball or football?

Another preacher found a few historical references that claimed Nazareth of Jesus’ day was a poor place to live. Not only because it was a small fishing and farming community, but because it was one of those towns that to a devout Jewish person, was (we might say today) on the wrong side of the tracks. Nazareth was said to be where a large number of Gentiles made their home, and there was reportedly a high number of immigrants, foreigners, and resident aliens who lived there. I’m not sure where the preacher found this information, but it could account for Nathanael’s dislike for Jesus’ hometown.

Perhaps Nathanael was a devout Jew who couldn’t believe the Messiah would come from a place that wasn’t Bethlehem, Jerusalem, or some other place that was significant in Jewish history or where more prominent religious folks resided. And there are other indications that Nathanael was a devout follower of the Jewish faith in today’s section of the Gospel: Jesus saw him sitting under a fig tree, which is a traditional way of saying Nathanael was a student of Jewish law. Nathanael used the term “King of Israel” to call Jesus the Messiah, which was another sign he knew the Old Testament stories where Israel was a term that indicated God’s People.

And that is where the epiphany, or manifestation of the divine, happened in today’s Gospel. In answer to his questioning of the Messiah coming from a godforsaken village, Nathanael was challenged to meet Jesus himself. And upon meeting him, Jesus revealed he knew Nathanael for who he is, which did something to Nathanael and he changed, and he believed Jesus is who Philip said he is. What’s more, Jesus promised Nathanael that if he followed him, Nathanael would see angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man, instead of a ladder in a dream like Jacob had in those long ago Old Testament days. Jesus was saying this was no dream, God was really there. God hadn’t forsaken any place, and God has not forsaken anyone, even the people who don’t want to follow or don’t want to believe, or have given up. This is an important revelation of the Incarnation, of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us; Jesus is the ladder where heaven and earth meet because Jesus is **God With Us**, and God

With Us came from a village where there was diversity, where Gentiles, immigrants, resident aliens, foreigners, and Jews lived side by side. Which shows God had not forsaken such a place, God called it home.

I've read accounts of missionaries and aid workers who have traveled to places that we might be tempted to call forsaken: places recovering from disasters like floods or earthquakes or fires; or places of extreme poverty; places where people, usually women, have to walk miles and miles every day just to get a few buckets of mostly potable water; places ravaged by civil wars that have left innocent lives in ruins; places in our own country where addiction has destroyed communities, or greedy corporations have shut down local businesses, or native American reservations where their land rights can be changed at the whim of the powerful; and I could go on but I don't really have to. It isn't hard to think of places where there is suffering, fear, injustice, and lost hopes. Yet for those brave enough to visit such places, those who live in these places, they often tell or write of remarkable acts of kindness and generosity. And of prayer and songs that lift their spirits. And gratitude is expressed for things so many of us can so easily take for granted. And of sacrifices and beauty that manifest in unexpected ways. And these witnesses show us the truth that Nathanael discovered a long time ago and John's Gospel gives witness to: that no matter where we are God is there, just as God is here.

Perhaps the challenge for us who follow Jesus today is to first remember that no matter where we are, God is Present and to recognize Jesus when we encounter him. It is my hope and prayer that our parishioners who are visiting our brothers and sisters at St. Luke's in Merida, Mexico this week are discovering that despite our different cultures, locations, and weather God is there, that they are seeing Jesus manifested in beautiful ways in every place they visit and every person they meet.

Another challenge is for us to be more than observers of Christ's Presence, but to manifest his Presence through our own lives. In what we do and say, the ways we respond to acts of injustice or even in simple things like the words we choose to use or when we refuse to cozy up to power or defend the vulnerable or speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. And even more importantly, to tell our stories of where and how we encounter Jesus. Such witness is essential to letting the world know God has not forgotten nor forsaken anyone or anyplace, that Jesus is here, and where Jesus is, God is, and where God is, there is hope and there is life.