

Come and See
1 Timothy 6:6-19

October 2, 2016

20th Sunday After Pentecost (LWML Sunday)

Have you ever been surprised? Surprises can be quite pleasant. After a romantic stroll in the park, a man gets down on his knee, pulls out a beautiful ring, and asks his high school sweetheart, "Would you marry me?" A young wife eagerly shares big news with her unsuspecting husband: "Guess what? We are having a baby!" Surprises can also be unpleasant. Unexpected rain pours down on the much anticipated day of your outdoor wedding. An optimistic job seeker receives a letter of rejection after a seemingly great job interview. News of the sudden death of a loved one crushes us.

All surprises are, by definition, unexpected. But not all surprises are received in the same way. People can have vastly different reactions to the same surprise. The presidential election is coming soon. The winner will be a surprise to us all. Some will celebrate. Others will lament. Think of movie or restaurant reviews on the Internet. One person's favorite film or café is another person's worst entertainment or dining venue. Same surprise. Different responses.

This dynamic is exactly what we encounter when Philip and Nathaniel respectively see and hear of Jesus for the first time. Through His only Son, God revealed His greatest surprise for a world in darkness: Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, has come from above to dispel the darkness. He has come to do some very surprising things. He came to die on a cross as a sacrifice for all sin and earn forgiveness of sin for all people. He came to physically rise from the dead to life again and to give new life that lasts forever. He came to earth that He might ascend and bring people to heaven. Yet we have two entirely different reactions to this great and surprising news.

After calling Andrew and his brother, Simon Peter, Jesus found Philip and called him to be His disciple too. "*Follow me!*" After spending time with Jesus, Philip learned the basics about this man from Galilee and shared the good news about Him with Nathanael. We sense excitement in Philip's words: "*We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph!*" Philip speaks as if he had found an invaluable treasure and he must tell everyone about it. He receives the news with a joyful heart. Philip sees Jesus through the eyes of the Holy Spirit, the eyes of faith. He has literally seen the Light!

What about Nathanael? Through the mouth of Philip, Nathanael hears of Jesus for the first time. But his reaction is entirely different from Philip's. We see no excitement upon Nathanael's hearing of the good news, but rather a sense of suspicion about the Galilean Jesus: "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" Nathanael's is not a joyful attitude, but a guarded posture. He receives the news with a cautious disposition at best, and a doubtful one at worst. Unlike Philip, Nathanael sees Jesus through the eyes of the flesh, somewhere in that spectrum between disbelief and unbelief. He is literally in the dark! The Light has yet to overcome it.

But the question remains: *Can anything good come out of Nazareth in Galilee?* The odds seem to be against Galilee. The northern province of Galilee is a land too close to unclean Gentiles and too far from holy Jerusalem in the southern province of Judea. No self-respecting Judean Israelite would look for the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of Israel, in such an unexpected place as Galilee of the Gentiles. Unlike their counterparts in Judea, Galilean Jews speak with strange accents and are known for a less than clean record on following prescribed Jewish laws.

Why look for God's power and wisdom in Galilee? It makes no sense! Is not the great city of Jerusalem the real center of kingly power and rabbinic wisdom? Are not God's holy temple and priests in the holy city? Are not the learned Pharisees and scribes there, too? In short, are not the clean, pure, and righteous Israelites to be found in Jerusalem? Can God truly work out His salvation from an unlikely place such as Nazareth in Galilee, and among such unlikely folks as Galileans?

God surprises us. We often look for power and wisdom in the wrong place, in the best we humans have to offer, in our holiness, purity, and righteousness. Yet it is in Jesus of Nazareth, the unassuming man from Galilee, that we are called to see the power and the wisdom of God at work. Even then, He surprises us by *how* He displays the power and wisdom of God. It is not through military victory on a battlefield to win a war, but through the humble sacrifice of his life on a cross to win forgiveness of sins for humanity. He conquers death, not by killing His enemies, but by being killed and rising from the grave to live and to give life to all who believe in Him. He surprises us by how He distributes His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation to you, not by openly miraculous ways, but in hidden ways – words, water, bread and wine. Surprises and more surprises!

Yet Nathanael reacts with doubt and derision, "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" How should Philip react to that? He could chastise Nathanael for his bias. He could argue his point and try to defend Nazareth and Galilee. Or he could do what he did: say "*Come and see!*"

Any lingering questions and doubts Nathanael may have had about the man from Galilee eventually come to an end when Jesus Himself appears to him and, to Nathanael's surprise, tells him exactly where he was before Philip called him, (*"I saw you under the fig tree"*). Suddenly, the light came on for Nathanael! The light of Christ overcame the darkness of Nathanael's heart. Nathanael had now seen the Light. Nathanael's infamous words of doubt are now replaced by his confession of faith: *"Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"* Good things do come out of Nazareth in Galilee.

What a surprise! God grants faith and salvation in a most shocking way: out of Galilee, through the man from Galilee. In addition to this surprising state of affairs, God also chooses to bring the light of His Son to the most unlikely folks—to Galileans themselves—and through them invites others to partake of the fullness of life in His kingdom. Andrew, Simon Peter, and Philip are from Bethsaida in Galilee. Nathanael is from Cana in Galilee. And the list goes on. A Galilean Savior with His Galilean disciples. How shocking! How surprising! A people too close to the Gentiles. A people with too strange an accent. A people possessing a different culture than their southern counterparts. Yet it is out of odd and lowly Galilee that the crucified and risen Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, sends out His Galilean disciples to bring the world God so loved into the Light, to bring a wayward, erring, and dying world to the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Who are the Galileans of our day? Who are the people in our neighborhoods who look and speak differently from us, whose cultural ways confound us? Whom do we think, from our narrow human perspective, are the neighbors least likely to benefit from God's surprising news of salvation in Christ? Who do we think, due to our close-minded sinful ways, are the neighbors least likely to receive God's gracious invitation into the life-giving kingdom of His Son?

You see, we too can be like Nathanael, doubtful about what God can do on behalf of and with neighbors in marginal areas like Galilee, cautious about strangers coming into and serving in our churches, guarded about inviting modern-day Galileans to be disciples of Jesus with us for the sake of the world. When we think in these ways, we are in the dark. We only see with the eyes of the flesh, and we close our hearts to the surprisingly gracious ways in which God reveals His great love for new neighbors near and far through His Son.

Yet God is merciful, and He surprises us again and again, inviting us to see with the eyes of faith what mighty deeds He can do in the most unlikely places and among the most unlikely characters. He calls us once again to see the Light, wherever He shines, even in Galilee and among Galileans! Jesus will often send us a Philip who invites us on His behalf to "come and see" that the Lord can do great things in and out of lowly Galilee. Through Philip, we are called anew to "come and see" that the love of God in Christ Jesus knows no ethnic, racial, linguistic, tribal, or geographic boundaries.

What is the church but a beautiful fellowship of Galileans? A marginal people called out of darkness into the light of the Son. A people once dead raised to new life through faith in God's Son. Through strangers in our midst, God reminds us that the church is a bunch of strangers in a foreign land. We are in the world, but not of the world. To the world, we are complete strangers, speaking with a strange accent and walking to a strange beat.

We speak the ancient language of Holy Scripture. We initiate people into the church by sprinkling them with water at our fonts. We eat the body and drink the blood of God's Son at our altars. Our pastors forgive us our sins. We even love our enemies. And we sing to the tune of strange-sounding hymns, canticles, and songs to worship our Galilean Lord and God. How odd! How surprising! We, too, are strange Galileans.

On this LWML Sunday, we rejoice in Jesus' calling and invitation to come and see once again what He has graciously done in our lives, His great deeds of salvation on behalf of Galileans like us. Today, we also receive with great thanksgiving and awesome wonder Jesus' surprising invitation to come and see what He can do and is indeed doing even among strange Galilean neighbors in our midst to extend His kingdom throughout the world. We also ask the Lord Jesus to open our eyes to His surprising opportunities for partnership with brothers and sisters in Christ from different ethnic and language groups in the United States and abroad, so that together we might invite even more neighbors to meet Jesus, the man from Galilee, our Light and Life.

Hey Philip! Can anything good really come out of Nazareth in Galilee? Yes indeed, Nathanael. Jesus, God's greatest gift to us, has surprisingly come out of lowly Galilee for us and for our salvation. Good things do come out of Galilee!

Hey Philip! Can God work out His salvation in lowly places and among strangers today? Yes indeed, Nathanael. "Come and see!" Amen.

(Adapted from a sermon by Dr. Leopoldo A. Sánchez)