

SERMON
“Stuck in the Land of Look-Behind”
John 1:43-51
Sunday, January 17, 2021

Norman Vincent Peale once told of a trip he took to Jamaica. In the hallway of his hotel hung an old map of the island. Looking at the map, he noticed some faint words written across an uninhabited portion of the island: "The Land of Look-Behind."

Peale asked the hotel owner if he knew what those words meant. He explained: "In the days of slavery, runaways from the sugar plantations sometimes escaped into that lonely and barren territory. They were often pursued by slave owners or other authorities with guns and dogs. The fugitive slaves were always on the run, always looking over their shoulders. And that's why the land became known as the Land of Look-Behind."

Peale made the following observation about what he had learned: *"I never forgot that melancholy term, because my years of counseling people have led me to believe that many of them are living in their own private Land of Look-Behind. They are the ones who dwell endlessly on past mistakes, who let fears generated by old failures rob them of success, who refuse to accept God's promises of forgiveness of sins. When a person lives in the Land of Look-Behind, he or she is really excluding hope from his or her life. They are also making it almost impossible for faith to operate. How can faith make an entry into a mind that has lost the buoyancy of hope?"*

In our Bible Study for this morning, we encounter a man who has lost that buoyancy of hope. His name is Nathanael and he is stuck in the Land of Look-Behind. Shawn Drake, pastor of Bel Aire Baptist Church in Hobbs, New Mexico, once described Nathanael's being stuck in the Land of Look-Behind as being melancholic; that is; Nathanael presented himself as being perpetually glum. When his best friend Philip told him the great news that he had found the one whom Moses had written about in the Law and about whom the prophets had prophesied and that he hailed from Nazareth; Nathanael, in what I envision as a very Eeyore-like sounding voice, responded: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"

Drake says of Nathanael's challenge: *"It was one of prejudice. Nazareth had become a town with a bad reputation. One of the main Roman roads that was between two great Roman cities went by Nazareth. There were many Roman soldiers who were in the area often and Nazareth became a very 'rough place' to live. As far as Nathanael was concerned; there was no way something good could come from that city."*

Where Philip saw nothing but hope, Nathanael saw nothing but doom and gloom. I am reminded of the woman who decided to go on a vacation. She asked her brother to watch her cat while she was away. On the second day of her vacation; and really missing her cat; she decided to call her brother to check in on the cat. Her brother informs her rather bluntly that her cat has died. The woman, naturally upset, bursts into tears and scolded her brother; "You can't tell a person bad news so bluntly. You should break the news gently. The first day, you should have told me Fluffy was stuck on the roof and couldn't get down. The second day, you could have said she had fallen, but the vet said she would be okay. Then on the third day you could have said she died from complications."

The next day, the woman calls her brother again and asks how things are. He says, "Well, Grandma is stuck on the roof and can't get down..."

When have you ever found yourself stuck in the Land of Look Behind? When have you like Nathanael ever felt in a perpetual state of gloom? We are three weeks into a New Year. For most of us, Christmas is a distant memory. The realities of the pandemic and turmoil in our nation's capital has buried what little hope we had going into the new year. Like Nathanael we're left wondering if this Jesus from Nazareth can really make a difference.

John, in his Gospel, is adamant that Jesus not only can make the difference; he is the difference. He not only will meet us in the Land of Look-Behind; he will lead us forth into the promise of new life!

Upon hearing his melancholic response, Philip is not deterred by Nathanael's indifference to his news. Nathanael's "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" is meant with an invitation to come and see. William Barclay, in his commentary on our passage from John's Gospel, says; *"So Nathanael came."* And what he

found was a man who could see into his very heart; a heart that Jesus described as being: “that of a real Israelite; with not a false bone in his body.”

Shocked that this man from Nazareth could see into his heart; Nathanael demands how he could have made this assessment in such a short amount of time. Jesus, we are told, tells Nathanael; “Long before Philip sent you to me, I saw you sitting under a fig tree.” Barclay says of the tree: “Not only was the tree leafy and shady it was the custom of peaceful men to sit and meditate under the roof of its branches.” Barclay further comments: “No doubt that is exactly what Nathanael was doing under the fig tree the day Jesus saw him; he was sitting under the fig-tree praying for the day when God’s chosen One should come.”

Homiletics says of this passage: “Here we see the principal of the mustard seed at work - when you express a little faith, you will experience a great faith.”

Barclay says of Nathanael’s encounter with Jesus: *“It was not so much that Jesus had seen him under the fig-tree that surprised Nathanael; it was the fact that Jesus had read the thoughts of his inmost heart. Nathanael said to himself: ‘Here is the man who understands my dreams! Here is the man who knows my prayers! Here is the man who has seen into my most intimate and secret longings, longings which I have never even dared put into words! Here is the man who can translate the inarticulate sigh of my soul! This must be God’s promised anointed one and no other.’”*

I love this story of Nathanael because it reinforces in me what I already know to be true; the only way out of the Land of Look-Behind is not, by our finding Jesus, but by Jesus finding us. Yes, someone will argue that at Philips invitation Nathanael came and saw this thing that had come out Nazareth; but what we often neglect to remember is that Jesus had already seen him under the fig-tree.

I can’t help but think of the little girl who accompanied her mother to a country "general store." After the mother had made a large purchase, the proprietor invited the girl to help herself to a handful of candy. But the child held back. "What's wrong. Don't you like the candy?" the proprietor asked?

"Yes, I love candy," the child replied. Whereupon the proprietor put a hand into the jar and dropped a generous portion into the girl's cupped hands.

Later, the mother asked the girl why she had not taken the candy when it was first offered. She replied, "Because his hand was bigger than mine."

Like this little girl; Nathanael saw that Christ’s arms were bigger, all-more encompassing, and all the more loving than his. My we, instead of living life stuck in the Land of Look-Behind look to the all-encompassing love of our Savior and Lord.